Reinventing Rapport: An Investigation of the Mother-Daughter Dyad within Contemporary Figure Painting.

by

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Signed statement of originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it incorporates no material previously published or written by another person except where the acknowledgement is made in the text.

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Abstract

This project is a visual exploration of a subjective experience of female sensuality within the context of contemporary debates about maternity, the female body, beauty and pleasure in western art. It specifically examines these ideas within the mother-daughter relationship (largely absent in western art) in a domestic setting. The conceptual foundations of the project have been developed through engagement with feminist theorists (Julia Kristeva and Luce Iragaray), feminist revision of art history (Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock) and personal experience, running parallel with a disciplined studio practice.

Employing a sequential narrative, the paintings aim to create a contemporary body of work celebrating the mother-daughter dyad situated within discourses about feminine *jouissance* and play. The research is informed by art practices from the Renaissance (Giovanni Bellini), from the seventeenth century (Jan Vermeer), from early Modernism (Gustave Courbet, Mary Cassatt, Edouard Vuillard, Suzanne Valadon), and contemporary artists (Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Gerhardt Richter). It seeks to discover possible new ways of representing the female body, specifically the maternal body in relation to the developing girl-child, so as to express a personal and positive idea of pleasure in the female body and its decoration using the tropes of the feminine.

The powerhouse of the project was a search to find a balance between feminism and a diverse and rich maternal heritage. In painting the female figure, the project attempts to create transgressive works which simultaneously honour feminism's core value, the empowering of women, but resist high Modernism's masculine, minimalist, hard-edged exclusion of pattern and a 'decorative' feminine aesthetic. Within the economy of my paintings the maternal body disappears, to become represented symbolically by colour and pattern, celebrating the

significance of textural elements - clothing, furnishing fabrics, bedspreads, carpets, wall papers; objects and styles of decoration chosen by the women who created the homes of my childhood and adolescence.

The project seeks to create images of the sensuality of the female body from both a feminine and feminist perspective, acknowledging female pleasure in looking at the female body, distinct from a voyeuristic male desire concerned with conquest or domination. The thesis exhibition is comprised of four series, which follow the daughter's development from the post-infant stage (where the separation of mother and child has recently begun) through to the pre-pubescent stage. Initiated into the rituals of femininity, the daughter gains cache in the world and the promise of sensual pleasure, beyond puberty. The independent gaze of the mother, and her absence in the final series, is an important signal of her psychological independence. In the case of the child, states of absorption or quiet activity, indicate 'flow' without passivity. Both figures are contained within their own interior worlds. If the works create an undercurrent of discomfort in the viewer, an unease at their proximity to this particular quasi-erotic intimacy, this is to be desired.

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Chapter 1 The central question(s)

Introduction - Initial proposal

My initial proposal written three months into the course provides a good starting point for my exegesis.

> My project intends to investigate new ways of portraying contemporary subjective female experience in the medium of paint. Following on from my work in Honours I intend to explore sensual pleasure in the context of the clothed female body. These images will express an active, knowing rather than a passive sensuality. The works will almost certainly be self-portraits. In the first instance the project's context has its roots in the personal arising as it does out of a painful family history, but it is connected to the political, belonging to what Caroline Heilbrun calls *Reinventing Womanhood in the Last Half of the Twentieth Century* (1997).
>
> The project's relevance to contemporary culture is found in the following recent publications by female art historians and writers. These works reveal a reappraisal of second-wave feminist thinking as it relates to two keys areas of my research: feminism and the body and feminism and fashion. For example Ann Hollander, author of *Seeing Through Clothes* (1993), recently curated an exhibition at the National Gallery, London, entitled, *Fabric of Vision, Dress and Drapery in Painting* (2002). Furthermore there has been a reconsideration of Ingres - Carol Ockman's Ingres' *Eroticised Bodies* (1995) and Aileen Ribeiro's *Ingres in Fashion* (1999). Susan Griffin's, *The Book of the Courtesans, A Catalogue of their Virtues* (2001), foregrounds an interest in women who combined the intellectual and the feminine in the creation of identity. There is also, *Erotic Ambiguities, the Female Nude in Art* (2001), Helen McDonald's study of contemporary Australian photography.
>
> A further context lies in the long history of female self-portraiture, a genre which Frances Borzello argues was used by women to subvert dominant cultural norms since the Renaissance. Borzello, who visited Hobart in 2001, recently published two books on women's art, *Seeing Ourselves*,

Women's Self-Portraits (1998) and *A World of Our Own* (2000). Contrary to popular opinion: 'Self-portraits are not innocent reflections of what artists see when they look in the mirror. They are part of the language painters use to make a point, from the simple 'this is what I look like' to the more complicated 'this is what I believe in'. [1] Self-portraits by men and women however fit into a limited set. Men and women often painted themselves at work, the 'professional portrait'. The male artist however often placed a female model in the picture; in one famous instant, Courbet's *The Artist in his Studio*, the model was not being used as a subject in the painting. While there are a number of examples of men painting variations of this theme, there is nothing of this kind in the history of female art before Sylvia Sleigh's self-portrait *Philip Golub Reclining* (1971). (Figure 1) Her painting of an androgynous male is a parody of this style of professional portrait and brilliantly interrupts this tradition. It is with a desire to extend this genre that I approach my investigations of female self-portraiture.

Figure 1. Sylvia Sleigh, *Philip Golub Reclining, 1971*

Background to the project

My mother's life had been the central focus of my work for some years. She was born in 1929 and was a brilliant young woman in her early

[11] Borzello, Frances, *Seeing Ourselves, Women's Self-Portraits*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1998, p17

years but her life was all but destroyed by profound mental illness in her late twenties at a time when treatments for mental illness were crude at best (the late 1950s and early 1960s). She was eventually institutionalised when I was eleven; she would have been thirty-six. As I grew into young adulthood I observed my mother's deterioration and was acutely aware as an adolescent of her increasing deshabille; she became dirty, coarse, dishevelled, socially uninhibited, intellectually impoverished and eventually, like others who suffer from schizophrenia, a social outcast. During this time I met old family friends and relations who told of her early beauty, brilliance and warmth. Searching for her, I sifted through old photographs and wardrobes and found a strange comfort in the images of her as a young woman. She had commanded the elegance of her time. As the only girl of her five offspring I became her mother and our lives were intricately connected hereafter.

The earliest work I made concerning my mother (1997) depicted her as the broken figure she was in her last years, the old crone smoking alone in her stained chair. There were, however, always undercurrents at work. The same year I had painted her as the crone, I painted a portrait of her as a young bride. I also explored the medium of collage; these works included a nightgown with cigarette burns and her old corsets (1999) but later that year I collaged a red 1950s ball dress (an op-shop find). I also produced a series of works which were exhibited at Entrepot (School of Art, Hobart) in 2001 in an exhibition entitled 'Re-dress'. I made life size sculptures using chicken wire of ball dress forms taken from 1950s fashion books. The exhibition explored the theme of glamour as an imprisoning element for the women of the post-war period. The dresses were cages but their forms were nonetheless alluring and seductive. This work signalled the first expression of the attraction that feminine dress (with its maternal associations) held for me. My mother died in 1999; this allowed for a broader excavation of her life and times.

By 2001 my focus shifted to self-portraiture. It is a genre which women artists have used to insert themselves into art practice and command attention. The strategy can be read as saying "I am here". [2] The intention of my honours project (2002) was to link myself to my maternal heritage and to investigate ways of portraying myself standing ambiguously between the feminine elegance of the 1950s and the rejection of those ideas by second-wave feminist of the 1970s, the era when I was a young woman at University. My attraction to the 1950s and its particular style of 'feminine' elegance is derived from my earliest memories of my mother, reinforced by close examination of photographs of her as a young woman as well as the remnants of her personal belongings after her more mundane personal possessions disappeared from home. These artefacts from the era of her youth - the ball dress, the evening stole, elegant decorative shoes, a velvet stool were in stark contrast with the deshabille of her middle and last years. These things are the 'kit and tackle' of elegant women and are antithetical to 1970s feminist orthodoxy. Some of the objects included in this series of work had belonged to my grandmother and my godmother (an exact contemporary of my mother). These had a metonymic relationship to these three significant maternal figures. The inclusion of objects owned by other significant maternal figures expanded the psychological field of the project to include different patterns of lived female experience. As it happened I had a particularly rich and diverse maternal heritage.

Growing up I experienced two extraordinarily different kinds of lived female experience. On the one hand my mother's tragic life, on the other the life of her own mother, Dame Enid Lyons, who not only gave birth to twelve children but lived a significant public life as the wife of a state premier and later of a prime minister and eventually became the first female member of Federal Cabinet in the history of Australia. These two histories were greatly contrasting and complicated my

[2] Rosy Martin (Foreword) P xvi Marsha Meskimmon's *The Art of Reflection, Women Artist's Self-portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, Scarlet Press, London, 1996

relationship to second wave feminism. I was therefore intimately connected to two vastly different kinds of experience concerning the relationship of the mother within society. One history typified a not uncommon experience of women in the 1950s (the immediate post-war period) when confined to domestic roles and denied occupational fulfilment, many were afflicted with depression or psychosis and eventually institutionalised. The other was of a woman who gave birth twelve times and undertook a broad range of political work with her husband and on his behalf and later independently as a political figure. She was in every way supported and encouraged by her husband, who was unlike many of his male contemporaries.

My recollections of early mothering were positive, even during the period when my mother first became ill. After she left home, she maintained loving contact, communicating regularly and taking on an educational role, focussed on art, culture and society. The catastrophe of my mother's life was in part mitigated by the closeness I developed to a number of women of her generation who embraced me, a motherless daughter in an all male household. As well as my grandmother, there was my godmother, who became my closest and most enduring mother figure. These women had lived relatively fulfilled lives which involved a combination of domestic and other work (a mix of paid and unpaid). Although their lives were complicated by the aftermath of World War II, they managed to negotiate satisfactory lives for themselves, through the changes of the 1960s to the period of second-wave feminism in the 1970s.

In the introduction to *A World of Our Own, Women as Artists* Borzello makes the point that while it is an incontrovertible truth that women have been disadvantaged and never been equals in the art world, that nonetheless they "managed a life in art, not as grovelling supplicants, but by negotiating the system to their own ends. It shows how instead of being defeated by their difference, they treated it as a fact of life they

had to work around." [3] One of these strategies was to use fashionable dress to create a powerful persona and then subvert the image in some way so as to undercut the dominant code. As women were not admitted to art academies and forbidden to study from the male model, the self-portrait became an important avenue through which they were able to meet their male colleagues in the world of figurative painting. Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun's *Self-Portrait* (after 1782) is perfect example. (Figure 3) It is ambitiously modelled on Rubens' *Le Chapeau de Paille* (1622-25), however, while Rubens's subject is timidly alluring, her hands wrapped around herself and her gaze is forward but seductively averted. (Figure 2) Vigée-Lebrun extends her hand graciously toward the viewer and her level gaze meets ours.

Figure 2. (left) Peter Paul Rubens, *Le Chapeau de Paille, 1622-25;* Figure 3. (right) Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-Portrait, after 1872*

Borzello's research presented a way through my conundrum. I had taken on feminist values in the early 70s when women's struggle for their equal rights was particularly strident and these values included a strongly anti-fashion element – the catchcry of the time was 'burn your bra'. Early in my survey of feminism and art from the 1960s I came across an image of Betty Friedan at a rally. (Figure 4) This photo reminded me that the 1960s were freer, the anti-fashion agenda of the

[3] Borzello, Frances, *A World of Our Own, Women as Artists*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2000, p 12

1970s was distinct to its own time. Betty Friedan is speaking at a rally and is dressed in the fashion of her time which is relaxed, sexy and informal. Her décolleté is openly revealed. In the 1960s feminists seemed less puritanical.

Figure 4. Betty Friedan, New York, 1970

Painting was regarded by feminists as a particularly male domain and women were encouraged by the sisterhood to find new forms of art making. The female body as a subject was especially questionable for painting by feminist artists. However, the female body was represented in feminist art during the 1970s and 1980s but it was often the abject body and it was expressed using installation and performance art practices. In the period of (masculinist) High Modernism, obsessed by autonomous and pure forms of abstraction, the figure also seemed off-limits. This meant that women had been virtually been discouraged from figurative painting practice throughout both these periods.

Rethinking feminism and fashion – Audrey Hepburn: feminist fashion icon

My honours project was strongly influenced by a pivotal experience in the summer of 2000 when I saw *Audrey Hepburn, a woman, the style* at

the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.[4] The exhibition consisted of film clips, documentation about Hepburn's life, in particular her charity work and there were many of her clothes and shoes. The clothes were simple and elegant and had a restrained glamour. I was surprised and embarrassed because the exhibition made me weep. Later I realised that this event was an awakening. It gave me a glimpse of my mother's era and of her. The visit occurred just after I had used a 1950s ball dress in a collage.

Research into Audrey Hepburn, who has had an iconic status for women from the 1950s through until the 1990s, provides an explanation for why the exhibition had such a profound effect on me. In an article entitled *trousers and tiaras: Audrey Hepburn, a woman star* Rachel Moseley [5] argues that Hepburn's film roles were constructed for a female, not a male, gaze. The focus was upon her clothes rather than on her body. Hepburn has thus been understood as representing a democratic standard of beauty which in combination with her perceived 'independence' and 'naturalness' produced her as a star whose looks and style were potentially available to and achievable by any young woman. Many working class women had used Hepburn as a model and this had assisted them in gaining better lives for themselves. She was perceived as being different to Marilyn Monroe and for many women this explained her appeal and her increased availability to them. "Hepburn's difference was not simply her style and body shape, but also in her mobility and activity – she seemed freer and more independent …"[6] Her style of dress was described as being simple, unfussy, her hair was very short and she wore flat shoes rather than stiletto heels. She was described often as 'boyish' and in conjunction with her femininity, this was significant for a large number of women. My mother rarely wore make-up, had short hair and was somewhat

[4] *Audrey Hepburn, a woman, the style*, 7 December 1999 - 26 March 2000, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney
[5] Rachel Moseley, *trousers and tiaras: Audrey Hepburn, a woman star*, Feminist Review. 71, 2002, 37-49
[6] ibid, p45

unconventional. She also owned clothes of the style worn by Hepburn. Moseley concludes by saying "It is clear that everyday practices relating to fashion, dress and beauty may be both active and *not* resistant, but rather significantly invested in the production of hegemonic identities as a way of being able to be 'in and of the world' ".[7]

This led to other research on the relationship between feminism and fashion which I found to be extensive and opened up new possibilities for my work. For example, in *Defining Dress – Dress as object, meaning and identity* (1998), Amy de la Haye and Elizabeth Wilson, summarise this new position clearly: "In all its ramifications it is clear that 'fashion' can no longer be dismissed as trivial, unworthy and even, as used to be the case – immoral".[8] Dani Cavallero and Alexandra Warwick, in *Fashioning the Frame, Boundaries, Dress and the Body* (1998) state, "Dress…is a manifestation of the unconscious at work, in that it is a superficial volume about submerged dimensions of experience. Clothing then does not just operate as a disguising or concealing strategy. In fact, it could be regarded as a deep surface, a manifestation of the 'unconscious'…" [9]

At this time I frequently dreamt about going to get my mother's clothes from my parents' wardrobe. Except for her wedding dress, two ball dresses and evening stoles and her beaded bag, my mother's clothes were removed (for reasons which have never been determined) in the years after her departure from home. I was not aware of their absence until my early thirties. Her wedding gown and the ball-dresses had been a source of sensuous pleasure not just for me but also for my brothers. I can see and still feel the layered shimmering chiffon in deep emerald green, elaborately beaded, and the lush satin fabric of my mother's

[7] ibid, p49
[8] Amy de la Haye & Elizabeth Wilson *Defining Dress – Dress as object, meaning and identity*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998, p7
[9] Dani Cavallero & Alexandra Warwick, *Fashioning the Frame, Boundaries, Dress and the Body*, Oxford, Berg, 1998, pxxiii

wedding dress. Strangely I don't recall wearing the dresses although I probably did, certainly one of my brothers remembers wearing these clothes. It was a recurrent dream from which I would wake feeling panicky. These experiences may be explained using psychodynamic concepts.

Freud determined the manifest and the latent content of dreams; the manifest content is the dream recollected, the latent content refers to the underlying thoughts and wishes. "This, he believed, is typically based upon wishes, recollections, and fantasies related to the deeper emotional reactions of early infancy. In short the dream is a heavily disguised form of infantile wish-fulfilment expressed as a hallucinatory experience in the course of sleep."[10] The 'playing' with our mother's dresses indicated my (and my brothers') sense of loss and an unconscious desire for a reunion, in which the dress and fabric symbolized the lost object (person). My dreams (in adulthood) of going to the parental home to get (save) our mother's clothes further indicated an unconscious desire to save the person, the relationship and ultimately, myself.

Early work including Honours project

The Honours project had established clothing and feminine paraphernalia as important elements within my project and culminated in the completion of four larger than life size paintings. They touched on the performative element of femininity drawing on the body language of various women from the history of painting. These included the Baronesse de Rothschild painted by Ingres which was the inspiration for *Self-Portrait II* and Madame de Pompadour painted by Boucher which inspired *Self-Portrait III*. (Figure 5)

[10] Richard L. Gregory ed. *Oxford Companion to the Mind*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p274

Figure 5. Mary Pridmore, *Self-Portrait III*, 2002

Figure 6, Mary Pridmore, *Self-Portrait !V*, 2002

The final portrait (Figure 6) was not associated with a historical figure yet it combined the qualities I desired to represent - the playful, the elegant, the seductive and the disruptive. It was an entirely contemporary image. I was in trousers not a ball dress; the body language was my own - although relaxed there is a definite new self-confidence combined with an awareness of the complexity which lies behind identity.

Early experimentation and critical shifts in the project

My early experimentation within this program began with a series of small formatted, cropped details (to my eyes the *punctum*) from the large self-portraits of my Honours work. (Figure 7)

Figure 7. Mary Pridmore, *Flesh /Cloth I*, 2003

In this very early stage important shifts began occurring. After finishing five small pictures I resolved not to use self-portraiture as a format. I considered portraits of other women where I would combine elements such as gestures or poses taken from historical paintings of women, as I had done in Honours, with contemporary elements. I made some early photographic sketches of a friend using her home as part of the composition. However, I rejected the form of traditional stand-alone portraits of women as well. This decision was partly because I felt uncomfortable working as a director with the model, a friend who had empathy with my work. Consideration of the relationship between the artist and his/her model has been an underlying concern within the project and its successful resolution was a significant element in allowing the project to achieve resolution.

As these avenues closed off the project developed a clear and fresh focus on intimate family portraiture within a relational context in a domestic setting. I chose to create images depicting parents and their

children physically close but with the potential for emerging individuality. There were three key discoveries at this time; the theorist Julia Kristeva, particularly her essay "Motherhood According to Bellini" (1975)[11], the work of the French post-impressionist and intimiste painter, Edouard Vuillard, whose work was the subject of a major retrospective curated by Guy Cogeval in 2003,[12] and the impressionist painter Mary Cassatt, whose work I considered seriously for the first time as a result of Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1999)[13] and Linda Nochlin's *Representing Women* (1999)[14].

Kristeva's essay was pivotal, stimulating new ideas and facilitating the major shift in the project which occurred in the first year. I had been considering the mother-child relationship as a possible new vehicle for enquiry. The mother-child relationship is part of contemporary discourse concerning women's roles; the balancing of the work associated with mothering with the demands of a career, or indeed just the need for privacy and contemplation. Kristeva presents the different approaches to painting motherhood by the Renaissance artists Leonardo da Vinci and Giovanni Bellini as follows. "On the one hand, there is the tilting toward the body as fetish. On the other, a predominance of luminous, chromatic differences beyond and despite corporeal representation. Florence and Venice. Worship of the figural, representable man; or integration of the image accomplished in its truth-likeness within the luminous serenity of the unrepresentable." [15] This distinction within modes of representation offered a possible workable solution to the problems of painting the female form identified by Berger in his classic text *Ways of Seeing*; Bellini's

[11] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language, A Semiotic approach to Literature and Art,* Oxford, Basil Blackwell , New York, Columbia University Press, 1980
[12] Guy Cogeval, *Edouard Vuillard*, New Haven and London, co-published National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Montreal Museum of Art of Fine Arts, Yale University Press, 2003
[13] Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* London and New York, Routledge, 1999
[14] Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1999
[15] Julia Kristeva,. op. cit.,p243

integration of the image, the figural likeness situated within colour and light, as opposed to the Leonardo's depiction of the body as fetish (object), an element which had dominated modes of representation since the Florentine Renaissance. (Figure 8 & 9)

Figure 8,
Giovanni Bellini,
Madonna and Child (Lochis Madonna)

Figure 9,
Giovanni Bellini,
Madonna and Child, (Brera Madonna)

By focusing my attention on the work of Giovanni Bellini, two important new ways of thinking about my project emerged. Representation within my project would use Giovanni Bellini's model and enable me to avoid the problems associated with a masculinist approach to painting the female figure (that is as the objectification of the female form for purposes of the male gaze). The difference could be summed up as between subdued Florentine realism (a masculinist

aesthetic practice) and voluptuous Venetian painting (a more "feminine" mode of representation). My painting in this project would be concerned with luminosity and colour rather than obsessive perfection of form. In Bellini's paintings the figures go beyond the obsessive pursuit of perfect anatomical form, beyond the look of the figure. The space between and around his figures becomes a metaphorical representation of the mother. The mothers in Bellini's paintings are self-contained, not focussed on their infant son. Their inner life is represented by their distracted gaze and this combined with other significant elements (either the background in each painting or the strong colour fields of the virgin's cloak) illuminate the mother child relationship in terms of the psychological space.

According to Kristeva neither of these painters solve the problem of bringing the mother adequately into representation from a feminist perspective. In Leonardo's paintings of the Virgin, the male infant is the sole focus of "pictorial space and narrative interest. The maternal figure is completely absorbed with her baby; it is he that makes her exist. Baby is my goal, and I know it all - such is the slogan of the mother as master." [16] Along with this comes humanist realism and "Leonardo's fetishism of the body and an extreme refinement of the technique of representation by resemblance."[17] In Giovanni Bellini's paintings of motherhood we observe "the distance, if not hostility, separating the bodies of infant and mother in his paintings. Maternal space is there, nevertheless – fascinating, attracting, and puzzling. But we have no direct access to it. As if there were a maternal *function* that, unlike the mother's solicitude in Leonardo's paintings toward the baby object of all desire, was merely ineffable jouissance, beyond discourse, beyond narrative, beyond psychology, beyond lived experience and biography – in short beyond figuration. The faces of his Madonnas are

[16] ibid, p245
[17] ibid, p245

turned away, intent on something else that draws their gaze to the side, up above, or nowhere in particular, but never centres it in the baby". [18]

Figure 10. Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with St Anne*, 1508-10

In Leonardo's series of Madonnas we have the elimination of the mother which results from fear of her dominance. Kristeva describes Leonardo's feminine figures as 'furtively masculine' citing the examples of the *Mona Lisa*, *Madonna with the Carnation* and *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. (Figure 10) In Bellini's Madonna and Child paintings we may observe confused feelings about the mother, but a sense of her nonetheless. Griselda Pollock expresses it this way:

Julia Kristeva draws attention to the often distracted gaze of the Madonna and the formal function of the field of blue- the Virgin's cloak- which stages that dream of fusion and *jouissance* into which the child, or viewer might imaginatively dissipate even though the still and distant mother is no longer 'ours'. Such images, read this way for the fantasies that underpin the religious iconography, are not representations of a real, social relationship. They are the pictorial

[18] ibid, p247

realisation of a fantasy about a feeling or space, and not an actual person.[19]

Giovanni Bellini's work as interpreted by Kristeva contributed two new elements within my project. First, the idea that the mother could be represented in painting where the figure (painted in a looser fashion) is placed beside representational elements transmuted into more abstracted painting saturated with light and colour. This crucial element within the painting was to be understood as metonymic representations of the mother whose place is at the core of the project. *Jouissance*, as defined by Kristeva after her own interpretation of Lacan, is an element to be considered in relation to the work. "In Kristeva's vocabulary, sensual, sexual pleasure is covered by *plaisir*; "jouissance" is total joy or ecstasy (without any mystical connotation); through the working of the signifier, this implies the presence of meaning (*jouissance = j'ouis sens* = I heard meaning), requiring it by going beyond it." [20]

Secondly I was inspired by Bellini's representation of the mother's psychological space represented by the mother's looking beyond her infant. Bellini's mothers have individuality and are real in ways that Leonardo's Virgins are not. I used the element of the distracted gaze of the Virgin within my project to signify the mothers as within their own interiors while still warmly present to their children and taking on active if slightly removed roles in relation to their children.

My first experience of the voluptuous quality of Venetian Renaissance painting goes back to the first time I was in Venice in 1976. I was twenty-two and it was my first experience of total engagement with a painting. (Figure 11) Reflecting on this experience in 2003 I wrote the following:

[19] Griselda Pollock, op. cit., p228
[20] Leon S. Roudiez from Introduction, Julia Kristeva, op. cit., p 16

Figure 11.
Titian, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1516-18

A beginning is often preceded by another not recognised until later. In my case the beginning of this project occurred thirty years before. It was in the Church of 'Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari' in Venice when I first saw Titian's painting 'The Assumption of the Virgin'. (Figure 10) Painted in 1516 – 18, it is a monumental work which established Titian as the pre-eminent painter in Venice at this time. In a way never experienced again on that trip or on subsequent trips to Europe I was completely mesmerised by this painting. It is of course a masterly painting and therefore no wonder that it was the object of my fascination. Or is it as simple as that? The painting depicts a commonly known story of the Catholic European tradition - the Assumption of the Virgin to heaven after the death and resurrection of Christ. The story was very familiar, raised as I was in a Catholic boarding school from the age of eight. Everything about the painting is designed to lift the eye and the mind heavenward. God the Father sits beneath the arch at the top of the painting, floating in the sky, immersed in warm yellow light, ready to receive the Virgin into Paradise. The Virgin, dressed in red, the central figure in the tableau, is floating upward on a cloud supported by putti. Below, with arms raised heavenward, are the twelve

apostles. Colour and luminescence are used to create a rhythm and in that semi-abstract quality an opportunity for contemplation emerges as our eyes move around the swirls of fabric.

Theological explanations aside, this scene communicates one overwhelming impression and that is of separation and loss. It's as though the apostles are losing their own mother. So while this depicts a religious fable, for me the painting records in intimate and sensuous detail an ordinary moment of loss. Even though the figures in the Assumption of the Virgin are fully grown men their anguish is no less powerful. It is manifested in their gestures of dismay - the apostles grasp at the air trying to reverse the process, to pull Mary back to earth. It is a chaotic group – this is a device to increase tension and intensify their loss. The way in which the group of figures is cropped and viewed close-up gives a contemporary, almost filmic quality to the painting. Contrary to the orthodox religious demands of the day which sought to focus attention on God the Father, what is strongest for me (and possibly others) in this painting is the depiction of the figures in the foreground.

Many elements in this painting and my early experience of it seem significant to my emerging project. The dress and fabrics which were central to my Honours project and from which this current project is emerging have always functioned in painting as areas of semi-abstract spaces for contemplation. The immediate concerns of my project are about these elements – the intimate, the contemporary, the abstract and the figure. The point is that my own loss of my mother to mental illness and her slow death was enacted for me in this painting of human loss.

I returned to Venice in 1996 (twenty years later) and, of course, went to see *The Assumption of the Virgin.* Its impact was considerably less, no doubt reflecting the changes in my life. The painting in the same church which caught my eye this time was Titian's *The Madonna of the Pesaro Family (1519-26).* This painting seemed also true to life and

contemporary; the young altarboy breaks the illusion of the painting by ignoring the religious proceeding which are its main focus and gazing out toward the viewer. My response to this work foreshadowed my shift toward the child. (Figure 12)

Figure 12.
Titian, detail
The Madonna of the Pesaro Family, 1519-26

Edouard Vuillard (1868-1940) was the second crucial discovery at this stage, an artist I'd not encountered before. I was very drawn to a certain feminine sensibility and to his subject matter, women working in a domestic setting and family life. There are a number of male painters I was drawn to over the course of my project whose work seemed to have something of a feminine sensibility. Beside Giovanni Bellini these include George Lambert, Gustave Courbet, Pierre Bonnard, Jan Vermeer and Vilhelm Hammershoi.

Vuillard's *Mother and Sister of the Artist* (1893) captured my attention first. The painting depicts a disturbing fearfulness in Vuillard's sister; standing like a caryatid she is literally shrinking way from her mother' statuesque form into the wall. The mother is grounded and dominating within the space, in her black dress and with her legs firmly planted on the floor. The mood in this work is not particularly typical of Vuillard's work. What fascinated me about this work was the way in which Vuillard merges the decorative dress of the girl with the wallpaper pattern. (Figure 13)

Figure 13. Edouard Vuillard, *Intérieur, mère et sœur de l'artiste*, 1893

Vuillard's work is to my mind a form of homage to Vuillard's mother with whom he lived for the greatest part of his working life. His complete oeuvre struck me as being sympathetic to the feminine aesthetic and world. After encountering Vuillard I began to consider the potential to investigate domestic space to articulate psychological states. I had always enjoyed the work of Bonnard but had felt uncomfortable with his romantic use of colour and obsession with the female nude. The mood in Vuillard's work is subdued by comparison and his strange compositions draw you into the work. His use of colour is evocative; he plays the tonal range of his chosen palette with virtuosity, to use a musical analogy, in and out of major, minor and related keys. Vuillard's work provided inspiration which led me back to my childhood homes as well as my own home. The most important element in Vuillard' paintings of interiors as they influenced my own project was that while the figures seem enervated "their surrounding – wallpaper, upholstery, floor-coverings - teem with life." [21]

[21] Susan Sidlauskas, "Psyche and Sympathy: Staging Interiority in the Early Modern Home", 65 – 80, p67, Christopher Reed, (ed.) *Not at Home, The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, New York, Thames and Hudson, 1996

The third important discovery at this time was Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* which opened up the work of Mary Cassatt. Previously I had turned away from Cassatt's work made uneasy by its sentimental subject matter and in recent years I had not been much interested in the Impressionist painters who are so popular in our time. Griselda Pollock's analysis of Cassatt was a portal through which I could re-examine her work. Cassatt has provided a strong cultural antecedent, albeit one from over a century ago, giving me the confidence to examine a subject popularly regarded as saccharine and worthless. In fact her work has far greater depth than is generally considered and Griselda Pollock and Jane Silverman van Buren[22], among others, view her oeuvre as radical within the context of art history.

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) was highly regarded by her peers. Her work dealt almost exclusively with maternal imagery created using three main media - oil painting, pastels and dry point etching. The boldest and strongest of these works are her etchings completed toward the end of her career.

Importantly her work departs from the norms of Victorian society in which women were depicted as weak or defective or as models of exemplary goodness and saintliness. Hers (mostly mothers) are real, flesh and blood people depicted in their daily routines of caring for small children. Cassatt's work presents motherhood as a calling of significance and presents the mother-child dyad as essential for the child's mental and physical growth. She examined most facets of bonding and reciprocity in the early infant stage.

[22] Jane Silverman van Buren, *The Modernist Madonna, Semiotics of the Maternal Metaphor*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1989.

Rethinking the (self)-portrait

Curating the exhibition *Propinquity and Distance, Self-Portraiture in Contemporary Painting Practice* [23] in 2004 provided me with an opportunity to articulate my ideas about the portrait in contemporary painting. I proposed that as painting had traditionally been the medium of portraiture it had an important function in contemporary portraiture. This was because of the direct relationship between the body and the surface of the painting mediated by the hand directly onto the two-dimensional surface or with a tool such as a paintbrush, an oil-stick or even a hair brush.[24] I argued in the catalogue essay that there was locally an invigorated relationship between the exploration of subjective psychological states and painting. I was also proposing the prevalence of a new form of self-portraiture not overtly concerned with the traditional image of the artist's face, especially the eyes as the window to the soul. Within the post-modernist western world-view identity is regarded as unstable, shifting and variable. This makes the traditional portrait outmoded because it's based on the premise that there is one essential look which captures an individual's essence. In Shearer West's recent book *Portraiture* (2004) she argues the "assigning of a specific identity to a represented face and body is a strongly Western phenomenon."[25] She also cites Deleuze and Guattari on this issue, pointing out that they see the obsessive concern of the West for the face as a signifier as the western illusion of individual subjectivity. [26]

Five artists were featured in the exhibition - Wayne Brookes, Alan Young, Destanne Norris Brown, Lucienne Rickard and myself. The

[23] Mary Pridmore, *Propinquity and Distance, Self-Portraiture in Contemporary Painting Practice*, Carnegie Gallery, Hobart, November 2004
[24] Wayne Brookes puts it this way: ...'the very substance of paint becomes a pool of reflection, allowing the painter to drag out submerged issues about themselves and records them within the material.', MFA exegesis, University of Tasmania, *Visual Virtuosity – Contemporary Quatrattura Painting, An Allegory of the Portrait, p4*
[25] Shearer West, *Portraiture*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, p17
[26] ibid, p17

exhibition opened up for consideration within contemporary portraiture the possibilities of using various modes/styles of representation. It included the semi-abstract, the hyper-real as well as purely abstract works. All of the works evolved from intense personal experience and psychological introspection. These concepts were encapsulated by the title - the artists' subjective experience is the near/propinquity and the refining of their experience into abstractions, either literally or to other forms, the far/distance. This idea comes from Elizabeth Barratt Browning's poem Aurora Leigh (1853-4)

But poets should
Exert a double vision
To see things as comprehensively
As if afar they took their point of sight
And distant things as intimately deep
As if they touched them
Let us strive for this.[27]

The original series of works inspired by Vuillard consisted of sketch paintings on brown paper. Five of these were later converted to works on linen for the exhibition. These works were not gender specific – they included my husband and my son and a friend and her daughter.

However, after the completion of this series of works for exhibition I chose to focus on the mother-daughter relationship. The most successful of these works was completed last *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*. (Figure 14) The work depicts a young girl searching through a red handbag. There is a play on levels of interiority and the painting referred back to my Honours work and focuses on the paraphernalia of femininity.

[27] Lisa Tickner "May Stevens", Patricia Hills, Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard, Lisa Tickner, *May Stevens:Ordinary Extraordinary: A Summation 1977-1984*, New York, The Ram Press, 1984.

Figure 14, Mary Pridmore, *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*, 2004

The project would thus extend the theme from the Honours work exploring femininity as a socially constructed behaviour together with an immersion in the rich domestic interiors created by my maternal kith and kin. The rich reds and bright yellows of the girl's dress and her bag foreshadow this shift toward more celebratory colours. The exhibition *Propinquity and Distance* in November 2004 signalled the end of the preparatory phase of the project.

The revised project – the mother-daughter dyad becomes central

During this first phase I continued reading widely within the field of contemporary feminism. At first I was overwhelmed by the task, the field of feminism being so vast. I resolved in the end to confine my study to those who were critiquing revisions of art history, those examining the feminine as it is represented in the history of western imagery. These included texts by Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, both concerned to question the canon which had paid scant regard to the works of female artists.

My next important 'discovery' validated my decision to focus on the mother daughter dyad. In *Thinking the Difference, For a Peaceful*

Revolution (1994) Luce Iragaray indicates that there is a dearth of imagery depicting the mother daughter relationship in western painting. As she says, the "father-son and mother-son relationships dominate our religious models. While the father-son relationship is supposed to be closer to perfection, to Christians the mother-son couple is the couple that incarnates God; it is represented at all religious sites, and mentioned in all Christian services."[28] This is reinforced by the vast amount of religious painting which dominates western painting. Thus she puts out her battle cry:

> To anyone who cares about social justice today, I suggest putting up posters in all public places representing the mother-daughter couple of mythology – the couple that illustrates a very special relationship to nature and culture. This is a cultural injustice that is easy to remedy. There will be no wars no dead no wounded… This cultural restitution will begin to redress women's individual and collective loss of identity.[29]

There was a tension between a feminine and feminist dichotomy which energised and opened up the project at this stage. The mother-daughter dyad allowed me to explore my fascination with feminine paraphernalia and the domestic interior and although I didn't realise it at this point allowed me to express my own early relationship with my mother. On the other hand the work was to give voice to my own experience of giving birth and nurturing a child and with it the constrictions of motherhood, loss of personal time and space. I saw a pressure coming out of contemporary popular psychology about how small children need to be cared for in the early stages of infancy, toddler-hood and early childhood. As a generation of mothers we tended to over-compensate for the lack of psychological mindedness of our parents in the 1940s and 1950s, placing ourselves under a lot pressure to be perfect, catering for all the needs of our children - physical, educational, social and psychological. To relieve this pressure I wanted

[28] Luce Iragaray, *Thinking the Difference, For a Peaceful Revolution*, New York, Routledge, 1994, p9
[29] ibid, p9

to create images of parents and children where children were absorbed in their own worlds and the mother could be psychologically free. Within the project here were now positive and negative elements counterbalancing each other within the project

At this stage I attempted to rewrite the central question of the research investigation:

> Is it possible to find a language which depicts the maternal relationship in the traditional medium of paint in a way which acknowledges the feminist thinking which asserts the rights of a mother, of the adult female to be not an object but a subject and child (more or less equally) and which at the same time explores the intimate bond between the mother and daughter? This means that there must be a space for each, the mother and the child. The mother can be in her space, a psychological space separate from the child's. To find a space where both the mother and the child are subjects not object and subject... The work is also to suggest
> some of this same sense of enchantment which Kristeva discusses in the Bellini paintings; to be complex but optimistic and celebratory. In other words is it possible to depict the relationship between the mother and the daughter in such a way that there is both jouissance and ambiguity?

However, aware of the vast depth within the history of painting where male painters had limited their portrayal of women to stereotypes, either holy/idealized mother or nude (an idealised figure again) or whore, an important aim was to portray the mother as an embodied subject neither saint nor sinner, neither holy mother nor whore, neither the Virgin Mary nor Mary Magdalene. I wanted to return the mother to a place of importance within visual culture and of central importance in our society. She was to be the mother of our dreams but also an embodied real figure. The aim was avoid serving patriarchal ends which sought to limit women to their biological function.

My project focuses on the home, the place where I am a mother, daughter and painter. It explores the psychological dimensions of domestic interior space. These are empathic spaces and drew

inspiration from the pleasure my maternal forebears have enjoyed in the creation of family interiors. In my family, the decoration of the domestic interior provided a creative outlet as well as solace in grief, sanctuary for themselves and other family members, away from the outside world of professional responsibility. While the work was to draw inspiration from the homes of my childhood it avoided literal transcription of these spaces instead offering a contemporary re-interpretation of these elements.

Haar and Reed in their essay "Coming Home: A Postscript on Postmodernism" highlight the return of the domestic in high culture in the post-modernist era by artists and designers overturning the antagonism between domesticity and modernism which had prevailed for many decades. This return deals with both sides of the domestic experience: "Homes are as often sites of repression and stasis as they are cradles of empowerment and change".[30] The feminist dictum 'the personal is political' which had propelled women's issues into public discourse took the view that the domestic was not a retreat from the world but the arena where social forces interact with daily life.[31] My project builds on the idea that the domestic is a place of empowerment.

Domestic elements were part of my Honour's project but they functioned in isolation; there was no real sense of the figure being in a home. There were domestic objects but these were studio furniture. This project elevates the domestic and positioned the figures in real domestic settings. These elements were taken from the various homes of my childhood and adolescence, including the house I was born into, a small early iconic 1950s house built by my parents on a hill overlooking the sea in Burnie on the North West Coast and where I spent my happiest childhood years. The feeling in the work has also drawn on my grandmother's and godmother's homes where I spent a

[30] Sharon Haar and Christoper Reed, ch 17 "Coming Home: A postscript on Post-modernism", Christopher Reed (ed.) *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, op. cit., p253
[31] ibid, p155

lot of time growing up. The houses of my maternal forbears were of a kind; there were wallpapers reflecting different eras: full bloom roses from the 50s (possibly a gift from my grandmother who had very floral and often florid taste which was not to my mother's liking), bamboo from the 60s, bright red floral from the 70s. They were middle class homes where colour, texture and pattern were always present. These patterns took on positive associations because they formed the backdrop for environments where people (not just family members) were nourished with food and lively discussion of ideas and usually music. In my own visual language these elements are represented by freely painted sections of decoration or saturated colour. Within the project the dimensions of the domestic space vary; initially the space is compressed, then opens up, closes down and finally disappears.

While the form of the project shifted, the central impulse remained the same – the expression of desire and sensual pleasure in relation to a personal feminine consciousness. In the last year of the project I realised that the work is about myself – the paintings are a form of self-portraiture even though I am not literally represented in the work. The project is an outcome of my inner world projected onto and/or simultaneously expressed through the worlds/lives of the models who have become part of the project. In this sense it is important to add that the theme of interiority emerged within the work as a highly significant element. Within each series of images the models are contained within an interior domestic space each separated from the other either physically or psychologically. The project creates a fusion of multiple levels of interiority, both psychological and physical.

Brief description of the works

A narrative sequence evolved over the course of the project which was essential to the main argument and which mapped the 'reciprocal dance' between the mother and the daughter. This involved showing the role of the mother as at some point finishing her main task; having

prepared the girl/child for adolescence and her entry into the world. The idea of a series emerged which allowed the work to follow the intensive early work of mothering, from birth to puberty. In fact the thesis begins beyond the period of infantile attachment (the most demanding and intense period of mothering) and maps the process of increasing independence of the child from the mother. In chapter three I will outline in detail how I developed the works by allowing the desires of the young girls to determine the images produced. The final thesis submission consists of sixteen paintings in four distinct series/groupings.

The paintings are consistent with stages two to five of child development, as described by Eric Erikson (1963).[32] He developed an important approach to the understanding of the psychosocial developmental sequence, which was unique in so far as it covered the total life (and was not limited to the first three years of life - the focus of classical analysis). Erikson's work interweaves concepts of psychodynamics, family structure, social setting and historical and cultural factors. Stage one (0-1 years) is omitted from this project. In stage two (1-2years) the developmental task is to develop autonomy, and successful completion provides the "virtue" (Eriksonian terminology) consequent capacity for will. In stage three (3-6 years) the task is to develop initiative with, on successful completion, the capacity for purpose. In stage four (6-puberty) the task is to develop industry, with the consequent capacity for confidence. And, in stage five (adolescence) the task is to develop identity, leading to the capacity for fidelity. At each of these stages the child is proceeding toward individuation, which in Jungian theory refers to the process of becoming an individual aware of his/her individuality.

[32] Erikson was an analyst who was born in Germany and studied in Vienna and the USA. He was analysed by Anna Freud. Eric Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. New York, W W Norton, 1963

The Ella series (Eriksonian stage 2) deals with a girl of two years. The work dramatises a moment when the child is happy to separate from her mother, because her attention is absorbed by her mother's black evening bag containing a pearl necklace. These artefacts belong to, and for the child, symbolise, the mother, allowing a degree of separation (without distress). They function as transitional objects. The mother is close, but nevertheless, separate. The mother is dressed up and is ready to go out, symbolizing the next challenge to the integrity of the child. She is however unlikely to take the formal black handbag as it is daytime; it therefore functions as a transitional object.

The second series of portraits of mothers and daughters, the Phoebe series, has a girl of four and her mother as its subject. The girl is demonstrating initiative and industry (Eriksonian stage 3). The series portrays the girl painting her mother's toenails. I see Phoebe as a young painter; the nail polish and brush her professional tools, the mother her body-canvas. The mother functions as a stand-in for herself. The girl's actions signify complex physical and psychological develop-mental elements. There is the acquisition of fine motor skills as well as knowledge about feminine rituals acquired through imitation and practised on her mother. She uses her skill to prepare her mother to go out, at least in make-believe, and in this process she signals her growing confidence in her ability to tolerate the separation experience. The patient presence of her mother offers security as she acquires the ways of femininity.

Series three has a subject aged eight and her mother, the Mathilda series (Eriksonian stage 4). The mother is brushing her daughter's long fair hair as she lies on her parent's bed. An antique hairbrush with a brass handle catches the light and as well as a beaded hairclip. There is physical closeness and intimacy between the mother and daughter. The girl is quiet and her relaxation suggests she is at ease with herself. She is able to lie face down on her parent's bed, as she is being groomed but she is not yet able to lie on her back on this surface (the conquest of

intimacy being the work of Eriksonian stage 6). The girl is in her best dress, a fashionable mini and is getting ready to go out. The window is an important trope, signalling the world beyond the domestic interior.

Series four, the Tess series, features a pre-pubescent girl of 12 (Eriksonian Stage 5). Inspired by a scene when the daughter of a friend was dancing in her parents' kitchen; the resolved images depict Tess dancing alone. The daughter has separated from her mother. She appears completely at ease with her body and secure in her own identity. She is not in a particular place but is dancing into a world of colour and light. Her first steps are tentative but the final image reveals her smiling and turning out to the world.

Summary

In this sequential narrative, the paintings aim to create a contemporary body of work celebrating the mother-daughter dyad (missing in western art) situated within discourses about feminine *jouissance* and play. The research (which is studio based but informed by contemporary, Renaissance and Modernist art practices) seeks to discover possible new ways of representing the female body (specifically the maternal body in relation to the developing girl-child) so as to express a personal and positive idea of pleasure in the female body and its decoration (using the tropes of the feminine), while avoiding the predominantly masculine voyeuristic representation of the female body. I wanted to create images of the sensuality of the female body from both a feminine and feminist perspective, acknowledging female pleasure in looking at the female body, distinct from a male desire to conquer or dominate. While the project was not concerned with the nude as such, the body would inevitably be revealed as in contemporary women's fashion the body is freely exhibited. I sought to find a balance between these two opposing positions which were both personal positions strongly held. I regarded this task as highly problematic from my feminist stance formed as it was originally by radical second wave 1970s feminism. By

painting the female body, I sought to create transgressive works and simultaneously honour feminism's core value, the empowering of women.

This tension was the powerhouse of the project. On one hand there was a desire to make a body of work to pay homage to my diverse and rich maternal heritage. Its importance presented itself to me in the form of my attachment to various textural elements, clothing, furnishing fabrics, bedspreads, carpets, wall papers; objects and styles of decoration chosen by the women who created the homes in which I spent my childhood and adolescence. These elements are expressed through vibrant colour and patterning both real and imagined. On the other was the legacy of feminism. Its context is post-modernist in its return to realist painting practice and away from abstraction.

Ch 2 The context of the project

Locating the project within feminism:

reading for difference – the revised canon; the artist and his/her model

Reading for difference – the revised canon

In Chapter 1, I dealt with elements of my maternal heritage, a significant part of the context for the project. I also touched on the work of key theorists and/or art historians. In particular I am indebted to the work of a succession of feminist historians but especially Julia Kristeva, Griselda Pollock, Luce Iragaray and Linda Nochlin whose re-evaluation of the Canon has not only drawn attention to the exclusion of female artists from the pantheon but has opened up new ways of reading and seeing the work of earlier canonised artists. This revision of the Canon provides most of the artists which form my context: the little known women artists Mary Cassatt, Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun and Suzanne Valadon and the well known male artists - Giovanni Bellini, Jan Vermeer and Gustave Courbet whose work has been re-examined recently. Edouard Vuillard and Vilhelm Hammershoi (whom I regard as male artists with a sensitivity to female lives) came to my attention through their recent retrospectives. (Vuillard 2003/4 Washington, Montreal, Paris, London; Hammershoi, 1997/8, Copenghagen, Paris, New York).[1]

[1] The important essays on this subject are: Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artist's", *Art and Sexual Politics*, eds Thomas B Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker New York and London, Collier Macmillan, 1973; *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, London, Pandora Books, 1981, new ed 1996 London, Rivers Oram Press; Nanette Salomon "The Art Historical Canons: Sins of Omission", *(En)gendering Knowledge: Feminists in Academe*, ed Joan Hartmann and Ellen Messer-Davidow ,Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991, Carol Duncan's "Virility and Male Domination In Early Twentieth Century Vanguard Art", *Art Forum*, December 1973. pp30-39; Norma Broude and Mary D Garrard's *Art History: Questioning the Litany*, New York, Harper and Row, 1982, Griselda Pollock's *Vision and Difference, Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, London and New York, Routledge, 1988

Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon, Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1999) crystallized my thinking and was pivotal in my project. I became and remain fascinated by the ways canons are formed; they are not just the creation of academic institutions (universities and art institutions) as you would expect but are formed by other artists, writers, critics, essayists. There is not just one Canon, there are several Canons although today they have settled into well-known patterns, Renaissance, Modernist etc. It is now widely known that canons enshrine ideological values and have, in the western past, been founded on gender and racial exclusivity.

Feminist art historians sought firstly to expand the Western canon to include those excluded in the past – women and minority cultures. However, in *Differencing the Canon* Pollock argues a more complex position, going beyond the propagating of mythologies of women artists by feminist historians. Her position is to make a difference by an active re-reading and re-working of the canon in order to reveal 'that which, while repressed, is always present'.[2] She quotes the work of Teresa de Lauretis who suggests displacing the insider/-outsider division with a new position of a 'view from elsewhere'. This she defines as "not from some mythic past or some utopian future history; it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations. I think of it as the spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge-apparati" [3] This new kind of feminist reading was highly significant within my project; it can be summarized as follows: "Feminist reading is the active desire for that difference, that possibility of the discovery of something about ourselves that we don't know, that requires some articulation, some form of representation for what it is that we are to become available through its conjugation of lived experience,

[2] Griselda Pollock, 1999, op.cit., p8
[3] Teresa de Lauretis, "The Technology of Gender" in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* London, Macmillan, 1987, p25

unconscious repositories of memory and fantasy, and theory, namely a representation of all of that in the Symbolic."[4]

Differences can co-exist and cross-fertilise and women artists can come to share cultural space rather than attempt to destroy the other. This will involve a devalorisation of the artist as hero in order to unveil its underside which is the narcissistic identification with an idealised hero. This will allow for the reading of the work of male artists beyond the canonical "repetitious refrains, while being able to speak of the myths, figures and fantasies that might enable us to see what women artists have done, to read for the *inscriptions in the feminine*, to provide in our critical writings, representational support for feminine desires in a space which can also comprehend conflicting masculinist desires, liberated from their theological encasement in the idealised image of the canonical artist"[5] In the early part of my project I adopted this new reading strategy; this involved searching through texts, both primary and secondary (scanning and detailed looking at as much art especially painting in the flesh and literature, as well as art history, literature, philosophy) to find ways to enrich or indeed, to reveal my project.

My project is located within feminism and its foundation principle was to advance new kinds of feminine knowing. (I prefer the continuous tense 'knowing' than the noun 'knowledge'). In the first instance I was advancing my own knowledge, going beneath the surface, allowing my subjective experience to bring forth its knowledge, to reveal itself/myself. This necessitated a discursive approach, accepting levels of uncertainty in the belief that in this approach to art practice - fertilised by diverse stands of theoretical reading, art historical reading, discussion within the academy and as much first hand experience of art from all periods but especially contemporary works as possible, that a

[4] Griselda Pollock, 1999, op. cit., p8
[5] ibid, pp18-19

poetic truth would emerge. [6] I use the word warily. In a recent paper by Robert Nelson entitled "Pressure on the Poetic: the politics of the next reverie in the studio" he explains that we are shy of using the word 'poetic' because it carries considerable academic baggage going back to Aristotle. Nonetheless he asserts that it is the inspirational element in the best art and what artists strive to create.

The critical element in the project has been the making of art which both reflects my own experience and is cohesive with the core value of the feminist project: the liberation of women. A working definition of feminism is given by Christine Delphy who states: "In the same as feminism-as-a-movement aims at the revolution of social reality, so feminism-as-theory (and each is indispensable to each other) aims at a revolution of knowledge" [7] A widely accepted view is offered by Anne Stephen's: "masculinity is seen as 'acting on' something, being outwardly directed, and the feminine as subjective, turning inward."[8] By contrast the female aesthetic has been associated with other qualities: fragmentation, an anti-linear, anti-logical, discursive approach; employment of women's traditional craft skills; attention to detail; use of pattern and decoration; flesh colours, pinks and pastels; looseness, softness and tactile qualities. [9] The work of feminism is not finished. On the contrary, Julie Ewington's quote from Lyotard's reply to the question: what is post-modern " A work can only become modern/feminist if it is postmodern/-postfeminist. Postmodernism-/postfeminism thus understood is not modernism/feminism at its end, but rather modernist/feminist at its very beginning and that beginning is always recurrent. [10]

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[6] Robert Nelson, "Pressure on the Poetic: the politics of the next reverie in the studio", ACUADS Conference, 2006

[7] Christine Delphy, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, trans Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1981, p198

[8] Anne Stephen,"Notes for discussion: the Women's Art Register", 1975, 22 – 29, Catriona Moore ed. *Dissonance, Feminism and the Arts 1970-90,* Allen & Unwin in Association with Artspace, 1994, p22

[9] Jude Adams "A Decade of Feminist Art", Catriona Moore, op.cit., p102

[10] Lyotard: p119 translated by Meaghan Morris and Ross Gibson, Z/X, Sydney, winter, 1984, p16 Julie Ewington in "Postmodernism and Postfeminism", p16,

I first encountered feminist thinking as a university student in the early 1970s (studying literature, history and philosophy). The changes in this period were rapid and beyond my capacity to examine with any distance. This early second wave feminism was composed (at least in part) of dictums (which I uncritically adopted and retained, at least until I started studying Fine Art, twenty years later) regarding painting per se, representation of the female body and fashion. This was a logical position when it first achieved currency, considering the fact that the period of high modernism was so exclusively male. So feminist artists in the early seventies explored new ways of making art, to make their work distinct from that of the exclusionary male artists of their time, and from the period of high modernism.

However, by the 1990s there had been a shift in the ways in which women were bringing themselves into representation. Helen McDonald's *Erotic Ambiguities, The Female Nude in Art,* read in the summer of 2001/2002, helped me to a new position. She notes that in the 1990s in Australia there has been "a shift in feminist inquiry from danger to 'pleasure', and from the patriarchal ways women are 'looked at' to the ways women negotiate 'images of women' and make something of themselves. They neither resist patriarchy in a 'politically correct' way, nor revel in eroticism, but steer a position between both of these positions. Furthermore, they demonstrate how some contemporary visual artists included difference and absorbed ambiguity within their frames of reference, thus avoiding the totalising and exclusionary practices that feminism has sometimes been guilty of implementing. Their art achieves this in feminist terms by being reorientated towards the production of positive images of the female body."[11] The concept of 'ambiguity' outlined by McDonald enabled the negotiation of a path through the caveats and contradictions of

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Dissonance, op.cit., p118

[11]Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities, the Female Nude in Art*, London, Routledge, 2001, p38

representing the female body within contemporary culture. She says 'within the visual arts, ambiguity is an effect of re-presentational processes, a complication, a blurring, an uncertainty or vagueness. It may be consciously intended or it may be an accident'. [12] In the post-modernist, poststructuralist world, ambiguity may emerge via the intention of the artist or the interpretation of the viewer.

Marsha Meskimmon's important text *The Art of Reflection, Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* was also significant in the development of the project. It is predicated on the new understanding of identity which emerged from post-structuralism, that identities are complex and subject to the forces of history, culture and power. These ideas have influenced and strengthened my own position. This position is stated clearly in her introduction: "The concept of the individual as a fully self-cognisant and independent entity who can attain objective knowledge about, and mastery of, the objects in the world has been definitely challenged by post-structural theory. Individuals are formed by their encounters with the world; there is no pre-existent essence that is the subject. We are formed by elaborate interweaving of identifications with socially defined roles and expectations. These become part of our internal, or psychic, entities and can be both pleasurable and/or confining. Furthermore, we may experience contradictory positions within ourselves; some of the roles we 'play' may themselves define us in contradictory roles."[13]

In the introduction to Meskimmon's text the artist Rosy Martin notes the importance of a return to the autobiographical. "Since 1968 with the emergence of feminism and postmodernism, the auto-biographical has been refigured as a site of conflicting social discourses and definitions and a valuable starting point for examination of the constructed and

[12] Ibid, p14
[13] Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection, Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century*, Scarlet Press, London, 1996, p13

mediated roles of women, through personal experiences."[14] Importantly women have refused to be the site of another's desires and must still do so.

Helen McDonald's text provided a context to explore the tension between my own feelings about second wave feminism and my feelings about the limitations it sets up (either implicitly or explicitly) as 'political correctness' on a range of subjects - femininity, fashion, representations of the female body and mothering. Lived experience has been at the core of the project. By focussing the work on young girls and their mothers and using the medium of paint I have challenged core nineteen seventies feminist tenets. Acknowledging, however, the benefits and debts owed to the movement and their critical position on representation of the female I have set out to create real, embodied female subjects within each painting. This was a strategy adopted to differentiate my position from the overtly ocular-centric position of male painting of this subject. The works are focussed on tactility. Giovanni Bellini's saturation of colour and concrete luminescence and Vuillard's loosely painted dynamic interiors provided the painterly solutions.

The artist and his/her model

By the beginning of this project I had used the female body (my own) – semi-naked, but mostly clothed, in a series of self-portraits in Honours in 2002. Borzello points out that there is a strong tradition of artists both male and female using self-portraiture for practice.[15] However, it was a particularly important tradition for women because they were unable to join art training institutions and therefore had no access to the naked male model. The self-portraits painted during Honours were partly created for this reason, to learn, using myself as a model. There was also an element of avoiding the conceptual conundrum I saw in

[14] ibid, pxvi
[15] Frances Borzello, op.cit., p19

working with female models. These works had been about the female body in representation, inspired by my maternal heritage, with a strong focus on artefacts from my mother's era. These self-representations were also about exploring femininity as a mechanism for creating artistic and personal power. My doctoral project remains strongly focused on representations of the female body and examines femininity as a constructed or learned (rather than an innate) behaviour in the relational setting between the mother and the daughter. The work has resulted from a collaborative process with my models who have been active participants in the process. The decision to create a 'dialogic', rather than a directorial, mode of working relationship with the models in my project was important and strategic and a significant development within the project. It was in keeping with the feminist spirit and was distinct from the historical ways in which the female model had been used by male artists.

Many self-portraits by male artists in the twentieth century cultivated various myths about the power of the male artist. One of these was the paradoxical idea that the artist was marginalized and thereby powerful; this included the artist as tortured figure (Van Gogh *Man with a Pipe*, 1889, *Self-portrait as a Soldier*, 1915) and the artist as Christ-figure (Albrecht Durer, 1500, Paul Gaughin 1900). Most commonly the artist portrayed himself with his nude female model (Dix, Picasso, Courbet). Marsha Meskimmon points out that the artist with his nude model cannot be read simply as an occupational portrait because when these portraits were most common (the beginning of the twentieth century) the sexual economy of the artist's studio was such that while the artist was the proprietor (albeit of the most modest premises) the models were working class women who were also prostitutes. In her words "The analogy between the prostitute selling her body to the economically empowered client and the artist's model selling hers to the artist was more than just a titillating cliché in the early years of this

century." [16] Even if the model was not a prostitute it was "almost always thought that [she] was sexually available to the artist." [17] Meskimmon argues that even if the relationships between the artist and the model had not been sexual, the representation of this scene would, nevertheless, have sexualised it. These representations suggest the power of the male artist as creator over his submissive inspirational 'material' the body of the woman." [18] Women artists who worked as nude models like Gwen John and Nina Hamnett worried that their reputations as artists would be tainted because of this sexual economy of the studio. Artist and model would of course be assumed to have a sexual relationship.

An example is Courbet's *The Artist in his Studio (1855)* in which he depicts himself turning away from the naked studio model in order to concentrate on his painting which is of a landscape. (Figure 15) James Rubin offers an extended commentary on this aspect of the painting relating it to the philosopher Proudhon's theory of conquest of desire which Rubin explains "as both a means *towards* and a consequence *of* art production – the virtuous man rising above the material to attain the spiritual. If the woman thus stands for that which Courbet must strive to overcome, then she reveals a common gender stereotype – woman as embodiment of things of the flesh and of male desire."[19] Further the model in the image is depicted as looking on admiringly at Courbet's landscape which is the subject of the painting within the painting.

[16] Marsha Meskimmon, op.cit., pp25-6
[17] ibid, p26
[18] ibid, p26
[19] James Rubin, *Courbet*, London, Phaidon Press, 1997, p178

Figure 15, Gustave Courbet, *The Artist in His Studio*, 1855

An alternative view of this work and of Courbet is argued by Sarah Faunce in her essay, "Courbet: Feminist in Spite of Himself". She argues that the painting sets up a parallel relationship between woman and nature. The feminists read this parallel as a negative (female equated to the passivity of nature, male equated to the active world of culture). However, for Courbet the natural environment of his boyhood represented the highest possible value. [20]

It was therefore important for my project to find appropriate ways in which to work with female models. I resolved the dilemma by working democratically with my models allowing the work to evolve organically from the predispositions and predilections of the models themselves. This was mostly through the girls rather than the mothers. In most instances the models were selected because they expressed an interest in the work. Sometimes the approach was from the young girl, sometimes it was the mother, and sometimes it came from both. The models were selected from my circle of friends. The mothers worked or studied, and the children were in primary school except for Ella. The mothers were all passionate about mothering. The selection of individual models will be discussed in the third chapter.

[20] Sarah Faunce "Courbet: Feminist in Spite of Himself", Anthony Bond, *Body*, Melbourne, Art Gallery of New South Wales and Bookmen Press, p98

Exploring the themes of the mother and child (daughter) – Mary Cassatt, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and George Lambert

Kristeva's essay "Motherhood According to Bellini" begins with motherhood's impossible syllogism: " 'It happens but I'm not there' and 'I cannot realize it, but it goes on.'"[21] In summing up the central importance of the maternal body within western art Kristeva reveals an important difference between the work of two Renaissance giants, Leonardo da Vinci and Giovanni Bellini:

> … [C]raftsmen of Western art reveal better than anyone else the artist's debt to the maternal body and/or motherhood's entry into symbolic existence – that is, translibidinal jouissance, eroticism taken over by the language of art. Not only is a considerable portion of pictorial art devoted to motherhood, but within representation itself, from Byzantine iconography to Renaissance humanism and the worship of the body that initiates, two attitudes toward the maternal body emerge, prefiguring two destinies within the very economy of Western representation. Leonardo da Vinci and Giovanni Bellini seem to exemplify in the best fashion the opposition between these two attitudes. On the one hand, there is a tilting toward the body as fetish. On the other, a predominance of luminous, chromatic difference beyond and despite corporeal representation. Florence and Venice. Worship of the figural representable matter; or integration of the image accomplished in its truthlikeness within the luminous serenity of the unrepresentable. [22]

I have discussed in chapter one how this analysis of the different approaches to painting motherhood ignited the project. The comparison which Kristeva makes between the maternal to child gaze in Giovanni Bellini's paintings of motherhood and Leonardo da Vinci's started me thinking about the independent gaze as signalling a mother's need for psychological space. The dreamlike, distracted gaze of the mother came to signify (symbolically) psychological space. Leonardo's view of

[21] Julia Kristeva, op.cit., p237
[22] Julia Kristeva, op.cit., p243

motherhood was entirely narcissistic whereas Bellini's pointed toward a concept of inter-subjectivity.

In recent years analysts from diverse psychoanalytic schools have combined to formulate relational theories of the self. They believe that the human mind is interactive rather than monadic and the psychoanalytic process should be understood as occurring between subjects rather than within the individual. [23] The female psychoanalyst whose work confirmed my new leaning toward inter-subjectivity was the feminist, Jessica Benjamin and her text *Like Subjects, Love Objects, Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*. In a chapter entitled, "The Omnipotent Mother: A Psychoanalytic Study of Fantasy and Reality", Benjamin describes the various positions developed by Freud, Robert Stoller, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, and Luce Iragaray on the problem of the mother-child relationship before setting out her own position.

> I begin with a deliberately double-sided perspective to encompass the duality of psychic life, both the fantasy of maternal omnipotence and the capacity to recognize the mother as another subject. A mode of inter-subjective reality – that is, a relationship between two or more different subjects sharing certain feelings or perceptions – co-exists with a mode of fantasy as the unshared property of an isolated subject. The capacity to recognize the mother as another subject and the fantasy of maternal omnipotence are aligned with this duality. Hopefully these distinct psychic tendencies of our psychic organization constitute a tension rather than as has been supposed, a contradiction, an "either-or".[24]

The part the mother plays in the child's sense of the world and their relationship and each of their own relationships with the world is vital. Benjamin cites the work of D. Stern (1985) and Beebe and Lachmann (1988), infancy specialists, who have argued " that even at four months

[23] Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects, Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995, p28
[24] ibid, p85

an attuned mother is not undifferentiated, does not create the illusion of perfect oneness. Indeed, even in those interactions that appear harmonious, such a mother matches her baby only part of the time – more than mid-range responsiveness usually constitutes not harmony but control. In her play she stimulates an incipient recognition of otherness, difference and discrepancy."[25]

It should be understood at this point that my thesis does not draw heavily on Freudian psychoanalytic concepts which are antithetical to second-wave feminist thinking. Betty Friedan states, "…to Freud women were a strange, inferior, less-than-human species. He saw them as childlike dolls, who existed only in terms of man's love, to love man and serve his needs". [26] Further, within Freudian psychanalysis there is a darker side to the mother/daughter relationship (which I did not want to pursue). However, I used the work of the feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin who is authoritative on intersubjectivity, a pardigm which integrates well with my thesis.

The Bellini paintings had inspired the Ella series which set out to explore the idea of the mother being near her daughter but separate. The mother's modish dress (a red mini skirt) implies that she is off out and between the two figures is the mother's purse which has the attention of the child. The purse is a transitional object and symbolises the mother and feminine glamour. Jessica Benjamin's work on intersubjectivity consolidated my own philosophy of mothering and strengthened my resolve to find a visual language to express this notion of separation and intimacy. The Phoebe series is the most strongly connected to the Ella series in its treatment of this theme.

In the same chapter, Benjamin examines the question of how to break down the destructive archaic myths which have limited women's lives:

[25] ibid, p87
[26] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, London, Gollancz, 1963, p 58

"The point is therefore not to counter repudiation with rescue – to imagine a mother free of, prior to, the oedipal structure - but to 'see through' that structure like a translucent layer. We may then demystify the ostensible undifferentiated perfection – omnipotence as oneness – of the preoedipal maternal dyad as an idealized appearance produced by the Oedipal discourse." [27] The demystification is of utmost importance, for, as Kristeva (1981) declared, "If the archetype of the belief in a good and pure substance, that of utopias, is the belief in the omnipotence of an archaic, full, total englobing mother with no frustration, no separation, no-break-producing symbolism (with no castration, in other words) then it *is possible to* 'defuse the violences' endemic to utopianism only by challenging the 'myth of the archaic mother'."[28]

To avoid the myths, the mother as oppressively omnipresent and suffocating, and/or the mother as 'undifferentiated perfection' Leonardo's *Virgin with St Anne* (Figure 10) as opposed to Giovanni Bellini's *Madonna and Child,* (Figure 9) I wanted to represent the mother as a real figure with an independent gaze. I resolved to express the central ideas (mother as connected but separate; two subjects rather than subject and object) by creating a narrative concerning the separation of mother and daughter. It begins with the mother sitting close but separate to her child in the Ella series. The next series brings the mother and daughter physically closer (Mathilda I, II and III), however the paintings are about the grooming by the mother of the daughter, obliquely referring to separation, as she is preparing her daughter to leave the home and enter the outside world. The Phoebe (next) series has the mother and the daughter in quite distinct interior spaces. The mother becomes Phoebe's model. Phoebe is learning grooming skills which enable her to prepare herself for the outside world. The final (Tess) series has the daughter dancing alone, contained in her own company and capable of life beyond mother. The pattern is

[27] ibid, p98
[28] ibid, p98

in motion, blurred and with an unravelling of the figurative elements. The motion serves to abstract the pattern on the patchwork dress and hints of uncertainty in the world beyond. The dress is predominantly in soft grey tones creating a subdued element. Tess dances into space; this maybe an interior but is left undefined. Tess merely exists in a warm colour field. The image creates a joyous mood as we enjoy the girl's inner security. The paintings culminate in the literal separation of the child from the mother (absent from the final images).

The narrative elements and different relationships are unified by the use of decoration, saturated colour and contrasting textural elements. These represent the mother-figure (my mother, maternal forebears, and the fantasy mother). I allowed the child's fantasy of the mother (my own) to find an outlet in the domestic space in which the dyads are situated. Just as the clothing and accessories in the Honours project were stand-ins for my mother and my maternal heritage, so too do the patterns on rugs, wall paper and clothes and the colour and texture in the work, for this current project, function metonymically for my various mother-figures. I refer to the saturated but slightly acidic green of the couch in the Ella paintings, and the patterning on the walls and bedspread in the Mathilda series. In the Phoebe series the carpet is a dominant element - a loosely warmly painted pattern. These elements carry the fantasy or dream of the mother, just as the blue cloak and the scenes of village life do, in the Bellini paintings.

Mary Cassatt

It was only after reading Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin and Jane Silverman van Buren that I began to examine Mary Cassatt seriously, having regarded her work as somewhat saccharine and sentimental. **(**I was constantly alert to avoid this disposition in my own work.**)** Linda Nochlin borrows Griselda Pollock's to sum up Mary Cassatt's importance within the feminist project: she will be remembered for her production of a "body of works about women, an *oeuvre* which was

both feminine in its fidelity to the social realities of the life of a middle-class woman and thoroughly feminist in the way it questioned, transformed and sub-verted the traditional images of Women…"[29]

In a period when the subject of mother and child had become popular Mary Cassatt produced a body of work which was technically innovative and conceptually radical. She presents motherhood as a calling of significance and presents the mother child dyad as essential for the child's mental and physical growth. She contemporaneously shared this position with the psychoanalysts, and in this regard, was significantly in advance of the learning theorists and self-psychologists. She examined most facets of bonding and reciprocity in early infancy, one to eighteen months.[30] Jane Silverman van Buren argues strongly for her importance as an artist. "Cassatt's representations of the infant-mother dyad are radical icons that tolerate and embody psychic space in which the reciprocity dance can take place." [31] Such paintings as *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child* (Figure 16) sometimes referred to as *The Child's Bath* and *Baby's First Caress* (Figure 17) articulate a physical closeness between the mother and child in a moment of rapport.

By offering a reliable presence and empathetic interaction, Cassatt's mothers promote their infants' sense of a continuing self and a vitality to individuate and develop his/her own mind.[32]

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[29] Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1999, p215

[30] In the 'reciprocity dance', (a phrase coined by the infant researcher, Brazelton) the infant finds him or herself in the responses of the parent. "What is matched here and exchanged is something of the internal feelings of both participants." T. Berry Brazelton, "Joint Regulation of Neonate-parent behaviour," Social Interaction in Infancy: Affect, Cognition and Communication, ed Edward T. Tronic, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, quoted in van Buren, op.cit, p199

[31] Jane Silverman van Buren, op.cit., p142

[32] ibid, p 34

Figure 16, (left) Mary Cassatt, *Baby's First Caress*, 1880; Figure 17, (right) *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, (1891).

Another of Cassatt's themes is the sensuality of the baby, openly recorded and explored in artworks for the first time in history. The Victorian viewers of her images were invited to overcome their unease about the body and observe mothers and children at home with their bodies. Cassatt no longer hides the gender of the male child; *Baby's First Caress* (1891) is an early example. (Figure 18) This was revolutionary in her period. Physical pleasure between the mother and the child and vice versa was celebrated. This is exemplified in *The Mother's Kiss*. (Figure 18)

Figure 18,Mary Cassatt, *The Mother's Kiss*, 1890-91

Pollock used Lacan's concept of *jouissance* as a way of reading Cassatt's images of mother-child pleasure. *Jouissance* refers to a sense of deepest satisfaction which the individual imagines he/she enjoyed as a child, but from which he/she is now separated. It lies beyond the Freudian pleasure principle, and accordingly, may represent experiences akin to suffering. It is in this context that Lacan defines 'desire', an impossible search for some imagined moment of total unity, a search that is doomed to failure, yet driving our being as a result of our immersion into language. [33] There are different possibilites for male and female subjects in Lacan's idea of *jouissance*. The male can sever himself via the triangular structure which Freud named the Oedipus Complex. However, for the female subject this is problematic, requiring the development of the Electra theory.

My new sense of the radical nature of Mary Cassatt's work stimulated my own project and sustained my enquiry even though it continued to seem fraught with danger. The following quotation was one which I referred back to on many occasions; it allowed the project to go forward when I was experiencing self-doubt.

> If the lost pleasures associated with and the infantile rivalry with the mother can also be imaged in language, called the Symbolic - since language substitutes signs and symbols for real things so that they can be spoken about and thus be found in the realm of representations - there is a way that desire and language can function creatively for the woman subject. But only if we release the Mother from the half-light of infantile fantasies. As female subjects, we also need to create a Mother figure in the realm of desire and the Symbolic, not just keeping mother as a mute bodily remnant of nature – like a great Nature Goddess.[34]

The idea of releasing the Mother from the half-light of infantile fantasies, of bringing the real mother into representation was an important idea for the project.

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[33] Griselda Pollock, 1999, op.cit., p228
[34] ibid, p229

Cassatt proposed the cohesion of society originates in the infant's mind. It had long been thought that cohesion, direction and interpretation came from outside; from God, from the father, such as the papal father, the king.[35] Cassatt located social cohesion within the bonds of familial relationships. Avoiding any reference to the forces of politics and urban change her work verges on the ideal but "nevertheless retains command of her subject matter and develops a modern icon for growth and development. For the moment, her couples are safe from history, tradition, and biased mythology. These mothers are neither despairing nor saintly, the children protected by the membrane of maternal concern."[36] Her work is focussed on the attachment stage, in which "the mother's reliable presence and devotion protects the infant's emerging being and the sense of surround. In the earliest days, mother is needed to provide a post-natal shelter, buffer and membrane for the infant's thin skin and sense of self and a self of aliveness." My project begins with the next stage, focusing on the child as she develops from a toddler to the beginnings of puberty.

Griselda Pollock argues that the work of Cassatt fuses the opposing positions about the mother-figure which exist in art before and after the advent of modernism. Art of the pre-modernist era in so far as it was focussed on women was obsessed by the idealised dream of the mother. Whereas art beyond modernism was obsessed with women as prostitutes. "From Manet to Picasso, we can see how these twin faces of masculine fantasy – the ideology of motherhood and the fascination with prostitution – haunted the new art of modernism." [37] At a time when the avant garde were re-negotiating new art agendas Mary Cassatt (and Berthe Morisot) "forced a covenant between the new art and a 'representational support' for exploring pictorially a nineteenth-century feminine relation to the maternal *and* to a feminine

[35] Jane Silverman van Buren, op. cit., p144
[36] Jane Silverman van Buren, op.cit., p139
[37] Griselda Pollock, op.cit., p229

unconscious framed both by desire for the lost mother *and* by a creative identification with her."[38]

Cassatt's portraits of her mother Katherine Kelso Cassatt as an older woman were also influential in my early thinking.

Figure 19. Mary Cassatt, *Portait of a Lady (Reading Le Figaro*), 1878

These works of her mother signify a life beyond the demands of early mothering and running a household. Katherine Cassatt was twice a mother to her daughter; she supported her career, moving to Paris and being her daughter's intimate companion for eighteen years until her death when Cassatt was fifty-one. The most relevant image within my project is a portrait of her mother as an older woman, part of the family household but cut off from its daily chores. She is presented reading Le Figaro. (Figure 19) This is very important because it shows the mother beyond her maternal role, reading a paper regarded as an intellectual paper of its day. Pollock explained the significance of the work: "The conjuncture of maternity and intellectuality embodied in a portrait of one's educated mother reading is echoed at a deeper level by the daughter's creative act of 'bringing her mother into being' on the canvas through the gift of her own skill". [39] In this painting Cassatt is symbolically representing two different kinds of creative activity other

[38] ibid, p230
[39] ibid, p 231

than the procreative – Katherine Kelso Cassatt reading and thinking as well as Mary Cassatt engaged in the act of painting, the maker of new ways of viewing.

Her project is of great importance within the early modernist project as she was reinventing woman as a specific mother with a limited function, not the mother frozen in time as a source of imaginary primordial pleasure. Cassatt's contribution at this critical time in the evolution of art of the modern period is that she placed the idealised mother in a real world setting. Cassatt broke down my prejudices about the subject of the mother and the young daughter and opened the relationship up as a vehicle for expressing my ideas about sensuality. Memory of my mother and an intimacy shared between us before she became ill laid the foundations for the body of work produced within the research project. Its specific forms came out of contemporary situations where mothers and daughters engaged with the project, allowing their interactions to be photographed and then transformed into paintings. Cassatt's mothers are actively engaged with their children, and because she deals with the attachment stage there is intense focus on the 'reciprocity dance' between mother and child. The same dance is evident in my paintings but the mothers in my paintings are close but separated from their daughters, allowing their child to go through the necessary stages after attachment and onto individuation.

There were two other series of works of mothers and their children which I turned my attention to in the early stage of the project. One of these was the work of the eighteenth century artist Marie-Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) who had been an important influence in my Honours project; the other was George Lambert whose work I encountered in early 2003.

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun was a remarkable phenomenon, a child prodigy who was successful and wealthy in her lifetime and who survived with a career intact beyond the turbulent years of the French Revolution. Nancy Heller, author of *Women Artists* (1987) attributes the popularity of her work in its time to its "charming if saccharine quality". [40] I had resisted examining her work closely because I wanted to distance myself from the sentimental. However, both Frances Borzello and Griselda Pollock regard Vigée-Lebrun's work more positively. Pollock sees Vigée-Lebrun's paintings of herself and her daughter as "innovative in giving form to a mother's pleasure in her daughter's body and touch," representing the promotion of motherhood as both "sensuously gratifying and psychologically fulfilling".[41] The most famous work is *Self-portrait with her Daughter Julie* (1789) (Figure 20); it uses classical elements, the pyramidal composition, and encircling arms to create a circle of identity and reciprocal desire. I saw a number of her paintings in the Louvre and enjoyed them very much. Stylistically they stand outside my project however her theme of sensuality and pleasure between mother and daughter forms part of the broad context of my project.

Figure 20, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-portrait with her Daughter Julie*, 1789

[40] Nancy Heller, *Women Artists*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1997
[41] Griselda Pollock, op.cit., p209

George Lambert

On a visit to the Queensland Museum and Art Gallery in 2003 to see the Asia Pacific Triennial I came across the work of George Lambert (1873-1930). I had been familiar with Rupert Bunny and Emmanuel Phillips Fox, contemporaries of Lambert, whose paintings of women I have a sentimental attachment to because of their iconic status in Australian art. I had never focussed specifically on Lambert's work until this time. *Miss Katherine Powell* (1909), a portrait of an elegant woman in blue resonated with my own recently completed self-portraits, especially its decolletage and dramatic swathes of fabric. (Figure 21)

Figure 21, George Lambert, *Miss Katherine Powell*, 1909

In the background is a dark cloudscape suggesting romance and turbulence and echoing the sensuality of the fabric. Having not long completed a painting of myself in an oyster grey balldress, this picture with its drama and elegance stood out. However, it was Lambert's *Portrait Group (The Mother)* 1907 (Figure 22) which held my attention. It was the first image of a mother and child which I saw in this early stage and it suggested a direction which I could barely articulate at the time. This painting of a mother (Lambert's wife, Amy) and two children (a girl and a boy) with another woman (Thea Proctor) is an unusual grouping.

Figure 22, George Lambert, *Portrait Group,(The Mother)*, 1907

The companionship between the women is not so unusual but the contrasting ways in which these women's lives are presented is remarkable for its time. The painting suggests that not all women will choose mothering, some women will pursue independent lives like the single, professional artist and close family friend, Thea Proctor. The contrasting women's lives are signalled by the strikingly different costumes worn by each female figure. The mother is dressed in voluminous cream fabric, has a fulsome figure (apparently Lambert padded his wife's dress) and is carrying her hat, (quite possibly removed by one of her children), a young toddler dressed in the same colour hangs on to her dress and visually becomes one with the mother's figure. The strong impression is of an empathetic mother whose body is both the physical and psychological support for the child. The older child is standing independently nearby. The childless other woman is fashionably and formally dressed with a black jacket, hat and gloves which are made more prominent by the contrast of the woman's white gloved left-hand resting dramatically on her hip. Lambert's circle included two artists who actively supported the suffrage movement in Britain and while Lambert did not directly support the movement his paintings of women and children reflect some of its ideas. The suffragists recommended unconfined dress and families taking exercise. Lambert's works are from the position of the

male gaze on the world of women but, being a father, it was a world he knew; this separates his paintings from those of his childless contemporaries, Thea Proctor herself, Bunny and Phillips Fox.

The family group in this and other works arrested my attention because of the setting, a comparatively wild landscape. The outside depicted is not a domesticated landscape such as a garden or parkland (which we see in Mary Cassatt's paintings set outside) but appears to be a moor or heathland. The cloudscape suggests the possibility of rain and wind. Inspite of the somewhat artificial pose of the figures I responded immediately to the idea of the group being out in the wild. As someone who was keen on the outdoors and who spent longs hours outside with friends for companionship while my son was a pre-schooler, this image gave visual form to some of my own ideas about being a mother of young children, boys especially. For many months in this early stage of the development of the project I had Lambert's family groupings on my studio wall. These pictures remain visually very strong for me because they bring together a number of my personal passions - children, female com-panionship (without which early mothering would be unendurable) and the outdoors. *Mother and Sons* (1909) depicts the physical demands of mothering as I have experienced them. (Figure 23)

Figure 23, George Lambert, *Mother and Sons*, (1909)

In the centre there is the mother physically supporting both of her sons who embrace her warmly. There is of course a suggestion of sibling

rivalry which the mother deals with as best she can. The younger son who is naked leans against his mother, lying on her left leg and the other, the older child is draped over her back for comfort and reassurance. The mother and young son return each other's gaze and the older boy looks out toward us at the world beyond. This painting epitomises the enjoyable but at times overwhelming physicality of early mothering.

Aspects of the child in art and contemporary culture

In contemporary western culture, fortunate children have smiling faces and bright eyes. They have healthy skin, often orthodontically straightened teeth and shampooed and conditioned hair. Images of sexy women have long been used to sell merchandise and services. Now, images of well-groomed good-looking children are the money magnets of advertising. (Figure 24) Anne Higgonet in *Pictures of Innocence, the History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* points out that this image of the child which appears absolutely natural is in fact an invention of the modern era. Over the last 200 years the image of the Romantic child has permeated popular culture. Joshua Reynolds's *The Age of Innocence* (1788) (Figure 25) and Thomas Lawrence's *Portrait of Mrs John Angerstein and her son John Julius William* (1799) epitomise the Romantic child. (Figure 26) These children have no class, gender or thoughts; they are socially, sexually and psychically innocent.[42] With the Enlightenment, the older concept of the child born in original sin gave way to the child born innocent of adult faults, social evils and sexuality.[43]

Figure 24, Advertisement for LG, Weekend Australian Magazne, Feb 7-8, 2004

Figure 25. (left) Joshua Reynolds's *The Age of Innocence (1788)*; Figure 26. (right) Thomas Lawrence's *Portrait of Mrs John Angerstein and her son John Julius William* (1799)

"Pictures of children are at once the most common, the most sacred, and the most controversial images of our time. They guard the cherished ideal of childhood innocence, yet they contain within them the potential to undo that idea. No subject seems cuter or more sentimental, and we take none more for granted, yet pictures of children have proved dangerously difficult to control or manage." [44] This is how Anne Higonnet begins her text *Pictures of Innocence, the History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*. She warns of the difficulties of depicting children in contemporary culture. She also points to other difficulties about work concerning children, claiming that in her own academic field the subject of the child is dismissed as trivial and sentimental, good only for second-rate minds and perhaps for women. [45] Because such views are potent in contemporary culture, my decision to proceed to work with children was taken after careful consideration. I have, in this work, avoided sexualising the image of the girl child, while at the same time alluding to her adult sexual life ahead.

Debates are constant about the use of young girls, sometimes prepubescent, as models for fashion. There is widespread concern that the fashion industry encourages the eating disorder anorexia

[44] ibid, p7
[45] ibid, p13

increasingly prevalent in young girls. Undoubtedly they are used as models to increase consumer demand for fashion by extending the market to girls at earlier ages. Many of these images sexualise young girls; this suggests feminist attempts to change the culture of the male gaze have failed. The April 21/22 Weekend Australian Magazine's fashion edition featured a barely pubescent and arguably anorectic girl. [46] At some level the images suggest she is sexually available. The title of the sequence reinforces this notion -'desert flower'. There is a mismatch between the girl's body and the feminine persona she adopts for the advertisement. Her body is not physically ready for the role implied by her clothing and her alluring and clichéd body language. These include an empty expressionless face and passive body language. Her arms have no muscle tone but their elegant, loose faun-like quality is used as a formal element in the series. These images provide an example of the clichéd and sexualised images of young girls I have sought to avoid in my project. (Figure 27)

Figure 27, *Desert Flower Images*, 2007

It has been important in discussing and presenting my work to acknowledge a nostalgic element. Anne Higonnet's view is that images of children must always be associated with issues of relationship and

[46] *Desert Flower*, Weekend Australian Magazine, April 21 – 22, 2007, Photography, Stephen Chee and Styling, Edwina McCann

loss, nostalgia and death. “The modern child is always the sign of a bygone era, of a past which is necessarily the past of adults, yet which, being so distinct, so sheltered, so innocent, is also inevitably a lost past, and therefore understood through the kind of memory we call nostalgia.” [47] In her chapter on family snapshots she develops this point further: “When we mourn the passing of childhood we are mourning our own passing. The inevitable end of all life in death. We fend off death’s terrors, snapshot by snapshot, pretending to save the moment, halt time, preserve childhood intact.” [48] We never succeed, of course, so we have to keep trying, caught in what Sigmund Freud called repetition compulsion. The critic Jean Baudrillard has written that all collections defend their collectors from the fear of death. All collections, Baudrillard argued, are idealized images of the self, idealized but insecure, compulsively reinforced through repeated acquisition. There may be no more common form of collection than the collection of childhood snapshots, and none so hopefully wedded to the illusions of eternal life.[49]

An examination of genre paintings of children in the nineteenth century provides a useful contrast to my work; these kinds of images I find sentimental. The popularity of these images persists today and reproductions are common. One of the most popular of these pictures was *Bubbles* (1886) by the English pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais. Another almost as popular was *Cherry Ripe* (1879).

By the end of the eighteenth century pictures of children were considered “sentimental and therefore faintly feminine.” Whereas previously, sentiment was not relegated to the feminine, nor were pictures of children regarded as tainted by ‘feminine sentiment’. However, when Romanticism waned, childhood “remained Romantic” and the subject of childhood became intellectually marginal.

[47] Higonnet, op.cit. p 27
[48] ibid, p 95
[49] ibid, p 95

Concomitantly, gender roles polarized, and women became associated more closely than ever with domesticity. Childhood became a subject for women, a subject about women. The image of the child became increasingly associated with maternity, and pictures of childhood began to be designed for feminine audiences.[50]

Raphael had always been ranked among the greatest of painters, however, from the Renaissance until the mid-nineteenth century, paintings of the mother-child subject were relegated to second position after epic paintings of history and myth. In the mid-nineteenth century there was a re-ranking within the canon of the mother-child image and Raphael's greatness was relocated. In 1866 French critic F.A.Gruyer concluded, "Raphael is, in fact, above all a painter of the Virgin and the Virgin is in art the holiest incarnation of beauty" [51] At the same time these images were regarded as "drained of theological significance and replaced by meanings of a universal, non-denominational, maternity". [52]

The effect of this was double-edged. Depending on your point of view, "identification of women with the image of a mother worshipping her child could be either conservative or progressive, self-abasing or empowering, disembodying, or erotic."[53] Women's sexuality was narrowed down to maternity. Nineteenth century women identified maternity with sexual renunciation. As Renaissance pictures of the Madonna acquired maternal meaning, modern reinterpretations of the Madonna reinforced them. Secularising of the Madonna image shifted its meaning from theology to bodies. [54]The image now represented a mother embracing a naked baby and the mother and baby were represented as finding pleasure in their bodily contact.

[50] ibid, p39
[51] ibid, p40
[52] David Alan Brown in *Raphael in America*, Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, 1983, Higonnet, op.cit., p39
[53] Higonnet, op. cit., p41
[54] ibid, p43

A modern maternal Madonna cult emerged. Mary Cassatt's work epitomised the "Modern Madonna" although her examination of the theme was more radical, both conceptually as well as stylistically. In her work there was a meeting of the Renaissance Madonna and the Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. The latter influence is evident in many of Cassatt's pictures; a good example is *The Bath* (1891). (Figure 28) The Japanese elements include the shallow picture space and use of contrasting, subtly coloured patterns – the striped dress, flowered rug and jug shape and in the choice of an ordinary domestic moment. Stylistically as well as conceptually Cassatt's work has been influential. The central focus of this image is the contact between the flesh of the mother and the child.

Figure 28,
Mary Cassatt,
The Child's Bath, 1891

Post-modernism and the domestic interior - Jan Vermeer and Vilhelm Hammershoi; Virginia Woolf; Edouard Vuillard

Vuillard, Vermeer and Hammershoi were extremely important in my decision to paint domestic space. Although there had been a significant interest in the domestic as a serious subject for art practice in the post-

modernist era for me the possibility of the domestic as a subject was inspired by the ways these artists dealt with the domestic space and in Vuillard's case the context in which his work was made.

Vermeer and Hammershoi

Jan Vermeer (1632-75) emerged early on in my project as an influential artist in shaping my view of domestic space within the project. His paintings have been part of my internalised visual dictionary since before I can remember taking any real interest in painting and its history However, overexposure to these images through faded reproductions had limited my interest in these images. When I saw a number of his paintings at the National Gallery in London in 2005 I was very excited by them. Two reproductions remembered from my childhood which are part of the popularised high art canon of works include *The Milk Maid* 1858 – 60 and *The Lacemaker*. (Figure 29) These two works have a bucolic feeling about them and feature women at work absorbed in their domestic tasks.They both deal with the lives of servant women within bourgeois households. It was through the work of Griselda Pollock that I came to re-examine the work of Vermeer. She points out that Vermeer's paintings convey a profound sense of restricted and contained women's lives in seventeenth century Holland. [55]*The Girl with Pearl Earring* came out in 2004 and brought Vermeer's work into popular culture.[56]

[55] Griselda Pollock, op.cit., pp215-217
[56] *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, directed Peter Weber, based on the novel by Tracy Chevalier, released in 2004

Figure 29. (left) Jan Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, c 1669-70; Figure 30, Jane Vermeer, (right) *A Lady Writing a Letter*, 1632-75

Vermeer's work places women of different classes in the same intimate frame inviting a consideration of their roles in relation to each other. The servant women are represented as emissaries between the outside world and the frozen, contained if luxurious interior worlds of the bourgeoisie. The domestic, in this case always bourgeois, is a sensuous world, filled with light and warmth; yet for the bourgeois women who are its central ornaments it is a prison from which there is no escape. There is a sense that the maidservants are the privileged ones, not completely trapped in inert and imprisoned worlds. The window allowing light into the interior is a strong compositional device in many of Vermeer's paintings. It is the axis between the inside and the outside and is a key to understanding the importance of Vermeer's work from a feminist perspective. In *A Lady Writing a Letter* (1671) the inside/outside axis is intensified by the fact that the emissary-servant girl is looking outside through the window which illuminates the scene in which the lady of the house is writing her letter. (Figure 30) The letter is a love letter and "carries her body and her sexuality".[57] There are seven paintings out of about forty which depict women writing letters, reading letters: *Officer and Laughing Girl* 1658, *The Love Letter*, *A lady Writing*, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*,

[57] Griselda Pollock, op.cit., p 215

Woman in Blue Reading a Letter, Mistress and Maid. These pictures are important for an understanding of how Vermeer records the interior world of the Dutch household from a woman's perspective. Reconsidering Vermeer led directly to the Mathilda paintings in which domestic space is most fully explored. While I was still uncertain of the politics of representing domestic space, the window offered a way forward – a way of signalling my own sense that the domestic world exists as a place of refuge for the world beyond.

The Lacemaker has been an image which has been in my mind through much of my project. It is so popular as an image that it comes as a shock when you realise for the first time its distinctive quality of silence and absorption. (Figure 29) This picture helped me see that my own paintings were also dealing with the thematics of absorption. As the project progressed it was something I was aware of and built on, but in the beginning it just happened. It emerged as a concomitant of my working process; letting my child models be free to decide what they would pursue.

Coming across the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershoi (1864 – 1916) confirmed the importance of the window in signify the world beyond. Like Vermeer, Hammershoi registered the containment of women's lives and seemed sensitive to their limitations of their lives. In 1998 there was a major retrospective of his work, *Vilhelm Hammershoi (1864-1916): Danish Painter of Solitude and Light* curated by Mikael Wivel and Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark, exhibited in Copenhagen, Paris and New York.[58] Hammershoi was regarded as an important painter in his day although his work was viewed as controversial. Fonsmark notes that Hammershoi's interiors "border on the abstract, with a particular focus on the interiors of the apartments in which he lived. The

[58] *Vilhelm Hammershoi (1864-1916): Danish Painter of Solitude and Light* curator Mikael Wivel (Curator) Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark (Director), exhibited in Copenhagen (August 15- October 19, 1997), Paris (November 18, 1997- March 2, 1998) and New York (June 19- September 1998) New York Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

mysterious almost dreamlike atmosphere of these pictures evoke a deep personal artistic world. Behind the empty interiors we frequently sense an element of disquiet." [59] (Figures 31 and 32) The works which hold my attention are those in which a single feminine figure is contained, almost trapped in a frozen grey interior/existence. His figures are totally silent and static, subordinate to their reductive minimal surrounding. Hammershoi derived motifs from seventeenth century Dutch painting but the uncanny silence and inertia of his interiors have much of the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman by the Window* (1822). Friedrich's image is based on personal experience. The room is in his home in Dresden and the woman is his wife, Caroline Bommer, whom he had married four years earlier. This room is both a protective shell and a prison. There is the fragment of a mast visible beyond the window which may refer to an imaginary voyage as the woman looks out of the room.

Figure 31. (left) Vilhelm Hammershoi *Open Doors (Interior with woman in black on white chair),* 1900; Figure 32. (right) Vilhelm Hammershoi *Interior (with woman sitting at a table),* 1910

[59] ibid, p6

Aspects of the interior in art

The domestic is associated in the first place with memory and loss in my project. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (first published in 1958) is a text which has confirmed my attitude to the domestic interior. As he puts it: "If we have retained an element of dream in our memories, if we have gone beyond merely assembling exact recollections, bit by bit the house that was lost in the mists of time will appear from out the shadow. We do nothing to recognise it; with intimacy it recovers its entity, in the mellowness and imprecision of the inner life. It is as though something fluid has collected our memories and we ourselves were dissolved in this fluid of the past."[60] The house is a therefore a significant part of human psychology. For Bachelard, domesticity is equated with visions of a safe childhood which evoked through memory or fantasy, enables existence and action outside the home.[61] In my project I have created empathetic spaces in which to place my figures. The domestic is signified by rugs, couches, chairs, tables, and in the Mathilda series, walls and windows; these are a synthesis of diverse elements - remembered atmospheres, contemporary spaces made by women, and a conscious allusion to the painters whose work I have immersed myself in, in particular the soft focus of many of Richter's figurative works and the decorative elements of the intimiste painters, Vuillard, Bonnard and Cassatt.

The interior in the history of art is concerned with what it is to be human and reassures us that we are not alone. Sometimes interior elements are minimal within the overall picture yet the sense of the subject being in an interior space is significant. Manet's painting of his wife on the sofa in her large white dress is an excellent example**.** This is

[60] Gaston Bachelard *The Poetics of Space, The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places,* Massachusetts, Beacon Press, *1994, p57*
[61] ibid, p257

relevant to my work because in some of the paintings in the project the domestic space is created in a minimal way; for example you see only a couch or a rug and a skirting board yet I would argue the paintings (except for the Tess series) are unmistakably domestic interiors and quite distinct from works which are clearly made in an artist's studio.

Domestic space evolved in the early 1800s, when, for functional purposes (and made possible by increasing wealth) workspaces and living spaces were separated. However, representations of the domestic have been considered reactionary since Beaudelaire romanticised the life of the flaneur in 1859 in his essay entitled “The Painter of Modern life”. Modern life was defined as that which occurred in public – “ the landscapes of the great city”. Spaces of femininity such as “dining rooms, drawing rooms, bedrooms, balconies, terraces and private gardens – in short, the spaces of domesticity” were subordinate to the theatres, nightclubs, cafes and brothels. [62] Since then the domestic was been an underground subject; a genre regarded as an inferior subject except for Dutch painters such as Vermeer (1632-75) and Peter de Hooch (1629 – after 84). The Dutch placed a premium on the intimacy, privacy and comfort of family life.

The return of the domestic to high culture by artists and designers over the last forty years was reported by Saharon Haar and Christoper Reed in their essay “Coming Home: A postscript on Postmodernism” [63] The domestic in post-modern art positions itself on both sides of the debate, noting the home can be a place of empowerment and change, and/or of repression and stasis. The feminist dictum 'the personal is political' propelled women’s issues into public discourse. So, for feminists in architecture, the domestic was not a retreat from the world but the arena where social forces interacted with daily life.[64] There was also a growing acknowledgement of women’s unique sense of tactility and

[62] *Not at Home*, op.c.it., p8
[63] ibid, p253
[64] ibid, p255

interiority, and 'women's ways of knowing', in contrast to supposedly masculine reliance on vision.There were important exhibitions from the early seventies which challenged modernist indifference to the home.[65]

Susan Sidlauskas' essay "Psyche and Empathy: Staging Interiority in the Early Modern Home" identified important paradoxes relevant to my project.[66] She notes that Walter Benjamin alluded to the Janus-faced nature of the interior: on the one hand, a sanctuary from which a world could be safely observed – "a box in the theatre-world"; on the other hand, " stage on which one's most intimate feelings could be acted out with the greatest authenticity." Another paradox, that paintings of interiors give shape to the containment that defined interiority, yet breached its pictorial and psychological frame by actively soliciting the engaged response of the viewer. [67] Just as the relation between the body and the house seemed inflected by ambiguity and instability "so too was its analogue in paint: the relation of figure to ground". A strategy employed was to shift the relationship between the figure and the ground.[68] Examples include John Singer Sargent's *Interior in Venice* (1889), William Merritt Chases' *Hide and Seek* (1888) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room* (1860-61).

In pictorial composition, the formulations of body and house and figure and ground have been used interchangably. Sidlauskis contends, "…it is in the spectator's response to the distance between the two formulations which gives these paintings their particular potency. More precisely, the pictorial fusion of the figure and ground on the surface of the canvas is inevitably in tension with the spectator's psychological resistance toward wholly merging with its surroundings." [69] On the related issue of boundaries, Susan Stewart *On Longing* comments, "The

[65] *Womanhouse*(1971-2), *Dinner Party* (1979), *Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort* (1991) *Not at Home*, op. cit., pp254-258
[66] ibid, pp65-80
[67] ibid, p 65
[68] ibid, p66
[69] ibid, p67

body presents the paradox of contained and container at once. Thus our attention is continually focussed upon the boundaries or limits of the body; known from an exterior the limits of the body as object; known from an interior, the limits of its physical extension into space."[70] In representations of the body with a domestic space, then, we are contending not with one interior but two*;* the body itself and the container that surrounds it.

Virginia Woolf 1882 -1941

In the early stage of the project when I was still unsure of my chosen subject matter (the mother as a strong figure within the domestic interior) I re-read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1926) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) This was stimulated by seeing the film *The Hours* in 2003 [71] which is based on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway.* By focusing on episdodes of the lives of three different women from three different generations the film offers a multi-layered impression of women's lives. It was evocative for me because it echoes much of my own maternal experience: the Mrs Dalloway character is the wife of an important politician in the 1920s (a time when my grandmother was married to a politician, (though her role was much more dynamic in the world of politics than Mrs Dalloway's) and offers a glimpse of the period of her life; the second mother-figure's story is typical of the1950s, confined to a limited domestic role this mother struggles with depression and finally abandons her mother role for a life of independence; the third is a liberated woman in the 1990s who appears to have found a creative balance beween the demands of mothering (her daughter is now grown-up) and career. The other element in the film which stimulated my project was the focus on the home as a place of hospitality. The film took me back to Virgina Woolf's work and inspired a new interest in

[70] Susan Stewart *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993, p104
[71] Based on the novel of the same name by Michael Cunningham and directed by Stephen Daldry, screen play David Hare

the possibilities of the themes of the mother and pleasure in domestic space.

Woolf is one of the most significant figures in literary Modernism and regarded as a precursor of second-wave feminism. She opened up new areas for consideration as serious subjects for high art: the domestic and women's lives. She was an exponent of stream-of-consciousness and a major contribution lay in her creation of the autobiographical novel. In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf elevates the domestic as a separate and distinct element in the novel; in the middle section (Time Passes) the house, emptied of its inhabitants, except for the house-keeper's, is the main subject. Woolf is therefore an important cultural predecessor for my project based as it is on autobiography and the domestic. However, she wasn't regarded favourably by all feminists; Kate Millett for example criticised her for 'glorifying two housewives' - Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* and Mrs Dalloway in *Mrs Dalloway*. [72] Woolf represents a more complex feminist position, one which expresses life rather than pure politics. In this sense her work has been very important.

I was swept away by the character of Mrs Ramsay when I first encountered *To The Lighthouse* while studying English Literature at undergraduate level in the early 1970s. However I was always aware of the attitude of feminists such as Millett about Mrs Ramsay. I felt an ambivalence therefore about her character. Contented as she was in her role as mother and wife, she didn't represent the kind of model of mothering which we aspired to in the nineteen seventies. Mrs Ramsay's creativity was of a lesser order; it was the creativity of the mother, the supporter of other people's careers not her own. Nonetheless I remained drawn to her character. Now it's very clear that Mrs Ramsay was a perfect stand-in for a mother-less daughter.

[72] David Macey's *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p 404

In 2005 I visited St Ives to see where *To the Lighthouse* had been set. The work is highly autobiographical. In it Woolf brings to life the figures of her mother and father. Julia Stephens, herself a famous Pre-Raphaelite beauty, was the model for the generous, hospitable, kind-hearted Mrs Ramsay (whose Christian name is never divulged). Virginia's older sister Vanessa Bell acknowledged this in a letter dated 11 May 1927, in which she wrote: "you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her to me than anything I could ever have conceived of as possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. You have made one feel the extraordinary beauty of her character … it was like meeting her again with oneself grown up and on equal terms's" [73] This inspired my commitment to use autobiographical elements within my project.

The novel is experimental in all sorts of ways. It is almost devoid of standard plot and even character development. Section 1-'The Window' takes place in the space of one afternoon and evening. The second section, 'Time Passes' spans ten years and we visit the house and witness the effects of time passing. In the final section 'The ligthhouse' the characters from the first section who have not died set off for and reach the lighthouse. Its style is more poetic than straight narrative. The novel deals with the idea of painting itself. The climax of the novel involves the completion of a painting which is commenced ten years before, while Mrs Ramsay is alive. Its subject matter is mother and child -Mrs Ramsay reading to James, her youngest son. The painter, Lily Briscoe, reluctantly explains her work - an abstract painting of mother and child represented by the shape, of a triangle - "[m]other and child then – objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty …" [74] Woolf elevates Mrs Ramsay's life's work to an art form; her art is a performance enacted at the head of the table, "… [A]ll the plates making white circles on it …

[73] Margaret Drabble's introduction to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Oxford, World's Classics Series, 1992, Oxford University Press, pxiii
[74] Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, op.cit., p72

she had only this – an infinitely long table and plates and knives." Her artform is the giving of comfort, hope, communion and pleasure."They all sat separate. And the whole effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her."[75]

Woolf challenged concepts concerning the 'proper' subject of fiction. In her essay 'Modern Novels' Virginia Woolf states that "for the moderns … the point of interest lies very likely in the dark places of psychology." She contines," 'the proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon …' [76]

In a post-feminist era Mrs Ramsay is as we say 'just a mother, just a wife'. However, as Margaret Drabble points out "she is a creator of harmony, of beautiful moments, of memories. She charms and reconciles. She draws out the bores and cheers the downhearted and visits the sick. She comforts her children with fantasies and indulgences. She loves her husband, and her happiness spreads a glow around her." [77] She is the mother of eight children. She isn't a novelist or a poet or a painter like Lily Briscoe (the other major female character in the novel); her creativity is of another order – and of what now, may seem a peculiarly old-fashioned, womanly order. Mrs Ramsay undoubtedly represents elements of all my own maternal influences - my mother, my grandmother and my godmother.

Something of Mrs Ramsay's character and the social role she played comes across in Mary Cassatt's paintings of older women presiding over afternoon tea, *Lady at a Tea Table* (1883-85) and *The Cup of Tea* (1880). (Figures 33 and 34) Interestingly *Lady at Tea Table* was a painting of her first cousin once removed, Mrs Dickinson Riddle, a woman who was said to be very beautiful in her time but who rejected

[75] ibid, pp 112-3
[76] TLS, Apr.1919; revised as 'Modern Fiction' for *The Common Reader*' (1925), ibid, pxix
[77] Margaret Drabble, op.cit., pxxii

the portrait because she felt it was not flattering enough.[78] Linda Nochlin suggests that the taking of tea with its elegant accoutrements may have been paradigmatic of "the other kind of 'work' or more accurately, art, that leisure-class women engaged in, in addition to running fairly complicated, large scale households" [79] Tea is here represented as a sort of ritual occasion in the feminine, what Yeats has referred to as a "ceremony of innocence". The dilemma for Cassatt must have been similar to Woolf's and to many women artists: the desire for women's emancipation yet at the same time to honour the work and traditions of our forebears.

Figure 33, Mary Cassatt, *Lady at a Tea Table*, 1883-85

Figure 34, Mary Cassatt, *Tea*, 1880

[78] Linda Nochlin, op.cit., p181
[79] ibid, p181

Edouard Vuillard

Apart from Mary Cassatt the most significant painter of interiors within my project is Edouard Vuillard. Vuillard's work was an extremely important dicovery within my project. His work helped me move in a number of new directions. I was drawn to his reverence for his mother and whether he intended it or not I read his work as a kind of homage to his mother, a woman who did so much to foster his career. He remained single and lived with his mother until her death when he was a middle-aged man. She cooked for his friends and in a sense ran a kind of salon. She ran a business from home and this provided the inspiration for his work. Vuillard is considerably less well known than his friend and colleague Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947**).** I had enjoyed Bonnard's work since I first encountered it on my first trip to Europe when I was twenty one. I have a poster print of *The Table* (1925) from that time. (Figure 35) There was however something about its bourgeois roseate quality which made me uncertain. Bonnard's work represents the 'consummation of a peculiarly French ideal of modest but civilized living – informal, unpretentious, relaxed and with a natural 'good taste' that banishes any sense of vulgarity, particlularly that of the 'newly rich'.[80] *The Table* depicts a young girl seated at the end of the family dining table which contains the remnants of the family meal; she is absorbed in a small dish of food. This work is typical of a series from this period which has open space and solitary figures. “These are the simple nightscapes of an artist sensitive to the mysterious life that emanates from simple, mundane objects, as he is sensitive to figures islolated within the silence of a habitual act as if in the secret world of a private dream.”[81] The best known works of Bonnard are the paintings of his wife Marthe at her toilette. My love of

[80] Hugh Honour and John Fleming, A World History of Art, London, Laurence King Publishing, 1995, p750
[81] Antoine Terrasse, *Bonnard, The Colour of Daily Life*, trans by Laurel Hirsch, New York, Thames and Hudson, 1999, p87

Bonnard over the years had a furtive quality about it. Reflecting now I think it was because of its bourgeois quality which was out of keeping with the terrible events of the the early twentieth century.

Figure 35, Pierre Bonnard, *The Table*, 1925

Vuillard's work when I discovered it in 2003 were more accessible. The reasons for this were complex and but there are two which stand out: Vuillard's less romantic, more earthy and subdued palette and his focus on women at work. The fact that Vuillard's subjects are at work gives his figures more dignity in my eyes. My first thoughts about Vuillard were recorded in my journal in early 2004.

> In Spring 2003 I read an article in 'Modern Painters by Julian Barnes on Edouard Vuillard, entitled 'Contained Eloquence'.[82] This work gives form to my emerging visual vocabulary and makes my own thinking clearer. One painting especially draws me in. It is *Interiéur, mère et sœur de l'artiste* (1893). (Figure 13) Vuillard has painted his mother and sister in the family home. (He did some four hundred portraits of his mother and many of his sister.) What is immediately apparent is the tension created between the figures and the overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia in the pictorial space. The sister's position communicates fear; her back is pressed against the wall and the pattern of her dress is painted in such a way and in such colours which make her merge with the wallpaper. The mother is positioned off-centre, her feet firmly planted on the floor. Behind her is a dark chest of drawers. The setting is probably night-time. I assume this to be the case because of the lack of clarity with which the figures are

[82] Barnes, Julian, 'Contained Eloquence' *Modern Painters*, Autumn 2003, pp77-85

portrayed. There is a cropped table with the remnants of a meal on it off to the side. There is the small segment of a window which doesn't let in light, only darkness. The wall and floor create an uneasy feeling as the perspective is exaggerated and unnatural.

After I first saw this reproduction I began to consider the potential to investigate domestic space to articulate psychological states. Vuillard depicts the interiors which were typical of his day but he charges the patterning with dynamic qualities. The dotting and splodging of paint and the flat patches of colour all leave deliberate traces of the hand. Overall there is a sketchy unfinished feeling about his work which in this instance works to further his central purposes. The overall effect is poetic. These intimate portraits of people and their interiors provide inspiration, leading my imagination back to my childhood homes not just those I lived in but those I visited, especially my grandmother's and my god-mother's.

Through the Vuillard's work I encountered Henry Bergson. Henry Bergson, a philosopher known to Vuillard, wrote in *Matter and Memory* (1896)"…there is no perception that is not impregnated with memory. To the immediate and present data we receive with our senses, we add thousands upon thousands of details from our past experience". [83]

Vuillard opened up the idea of the domestic interior and stimulated my memory of the domestic spaces of my childhood. From a painting perspective he was also influential. I was particularly drawn to his works from the middle period of his artistic production. These include *Seamstress with Scraps (1893), Interior with Worktable* also known as *The Suitor (1893)* and *The Stitch (1893*) (Figure 36-38) I aspired to be influenced by his loose and apparently intuitive application of paint and his easy merging of the figure with the ground. This mode of painting remained an elusive search as I explain in chapter three.

[83] Cogeval, Guy, Vuillard, *Master of the Intimate Interior*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2002, p58

Figure 36. (left) Edouard Vuillard *Seamstress with Scraps*,1893 Figure 37 (right) Edouard Vuillard, *The Stitch, 1893*

Figure 38, Edouard Vuillard, *Interior with Worktable*, also known as *The Suitor*, 1893

Vuillard's early works were strongly influenced by Maurice Denis who was one of the Nabis and who aspired to an art of *synthesis.* Denis is most famous for his concept of a painting as a "flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order."[84] One of Vuillard's beliefs was that "the purer the elements employed, the purer the work ….The more mystical the painters, the more vivid their colours (reds, blues, yellows) the more materialist the painters, the more they employ dark colours (earth tones, ochres, bituminous blacks)".[85] In his later works

[84] Maurice Denis 1913 "Definition du neo-traditionnalisme", Cogeval, op.cit., p53
[85] "A guile de bois" as he puts it, Vuillard Journal, 1,2, fol.74, ibid, p53

this attachment to pure colour altered and so his figures were painted with more naturalistic colours.

At first glance the pictorial structures in all Vuillard's paintings seem random and idiosyncratic – even aberrant. But in fact, they conform to a fairly predictable mix of asymmetry, imbalance, and distortion: precisely the features that among others, have come to be identified as the early signs of "modernity" in painting. The com-positional strategies employed here would later become, in a more reductive form, fundamentals of the vocabulary of abstraction, the identification of figure and ground, the emphasis on "negative" space.[86] The figure represented within that space becomes a surrogate for the spectator's own empathic responses: a substitute through which we can vicariously experience the imagined discomfort of a space too compressed or too attenuated, a furniture arrangement too confining, or another figure too near or too far away.

Vuillard's influence was extremely important in releasing me from the Modernist anti-domestic precept which for some reason had held sway in my thinking until this time. There were a number of specific strategies which emerged in my work and which can be linked to Vuillard's work. In the earliest works, the five paintings for *Propinquity and Distance*, I experimented with brown (paper) grounds (later raw linen) and unconventional kinds of pictorial space. In the *Mathilda* and *Phoebe* series there is the use of diagonal compositional elements within vertical or horizontal formats and the looser painting of patterned elements. Vuillard's paintings are linked in my mind with the work of the aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye: the loose intuitive splodging of paint. I consistently immersed myself in Vuillard's work over the course of the project and his influence on my work will continue.

[86] ibid, p67-68

Decoration - Early versus High modernism

Vuillard was associated with two important artistic movements of his time – the 'Intimistes' and the 'Nabis'. Both of these movements were concerned with decoration which came into disrepute in the middle part of the twentieth century, the period of high Modernism.

The debate began with Adolf Loos "Ornament and Crime" (1908) which asserted that the more refined man is the 'less inclined to decorate whereas children, Papuan natives and criminals write graffiti, tattoo and draw everywhere with reckless abandon.' In an article on "Ladies Fashion" Loos includes women with underdeveloped, excessively adorned primitives: " The clothing of woman is distinguished externally from that of man by the preference for the ornamental and colourful effects…". [87] Art of the high modernist period asserted a hugely anti-decorative position. For Greenberg and Rosenberg the domestic was anti-art. In the history of modernist art the domestic remains a site of anxiety and subversion.[88]

In the early stages of the Modernist project there was a new interest in aesthetic matters within homes of the bourgeoisie. In 1850 the home was a showplace of male class and occupational status. However, by the late nineteenth century the domestic interior emerged as a separate sphere of feminine self-expression and identity formation.[89] Beginning in the mid 1880s decorating handbooks flooded the market. In this period women excluded from masculine realms of creativity were assigned the role of consumer as decorator of the home.[90] The relationship between women and interior decoration is therefore a fact of relatively recent history and undoubtedly a result of social forces not of their making. Lisa Tiersen makes a relevant point in her essay "The

[87] Jenny Anger, Ch. 9 "Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory, 1900 –1915, *Not at Home,* op.cit., p130
[88] ibid, pp15-16
[89] ibid, pp18-19
[90] ibid, p16

Chic Interior and The Feminine Modern: Home Decorating as High Art in Turn-of-the-Century Paris":

> Art historians have tended to overlook the evidence of the feminine modern, taking modernists too much at their word by conceiving of the clinical eye of the male *flaneur* as the heart of the modernist project. In fact the perceived polarity between masculine high modernism and feminine decorative domestic culture concealed an underlying intimacy between the two aesthetics. Although there existed no direct female analogue to the male *flaneur*, modernism did engender a feminine point of view, one which was situated in the bourgeois interior rather than in the street.[91]

Beauty a subject in contemporary art

In chapter one I touched on the subject of femininity (perhaps it could better be called beautification). The point made was that over the centuries women have used glamour and fashion to create or increase their personal power, or to negotiate their ways through masculine fields such as painting and the profession of art.

My earliest concepts of beauty were mixed with concepts of mothering and feminine submission. I was raised in a middle-class Catholic family; this ensured a particular exposure to female religious iconography of the Virgin Mary. My mother had a special regard for the Renaissance painters, Raphael and Michelangelo. Their images were my introduction to aesthetics and also shaped my early ideas about feminine beauty and motherhood. They epitomised an optimal feminine state, feminine beauty combined with spiritual beauty. At this time I thought of them as devotional figures and great paintings.

However, even before I encountered second-wave feminism as a young university student in the 1970s I rebelled against the unacceptable

[91] ibid, p29

submissiveness of the Raphael Madonna paintings. Looking at these images through this lens, I noticed the Virgin's humble demeanour with heads bowed and eyes downcast. The association between the submissiveness and the beauty meant that the beauty, through association, also became unacceptable. However, the feminist tenets of the time, which I embraced, could not totally extinguish their beauty and I was constantly brought back to this aspect of these images. There was a constant oscillation between acceptance and rejection of these images from the perspective of beauty. Not so for the submissiveness which became and remained repugnant. In retrospect I realise that in my late adolescence, I had begun to read the Madonnas as real women dealing with life. They were no longer just the religious figures of devotion of my childhood, instead they were flesh and blood mothers.

Their modest demeanour made them hugely out of kilter with the recommended images of women coming through the mass media. They presented a particular kind of female beauty, which epitomised but tainted, my notions of female beauty. A classical idealised beauty that inspite of my denial still influenced my emotional life. What I didn't realise at the time was an ambivalence which remains, in my feelings about these images. Freud's essay on Michelangelo and Kristeva's re-examination of the maternal and placing it in a new context in relation to the vast number of paintings by Giovanni Bellini brought the personal and the visual into play in a new way in my reading of art history. However, the Renaissance Madonnas commanded a central place in my project.

Eventually concepts of feminine beauty became the subject of investigations by late twentieth century artists. In a recent text *Beauty Matters* Peg Zeglin Brand begins by analysing a photographic image by Carrie Mae Weemes (1990) which is both an '*instance* of beauty' but

also '*about* beauty – the adornment and display of the female body. [92] (Figure 39) Her description of the photograph could be a description of any one of my thesis paintings:

> The space is balanced. The scene is quiet and unassuming. The luminescent skin tones of woman and child reflect the glow of a single light bulb. Time stands still for the brief and trivial act of applying lipstick. Absorbed in mirror-reflections, anticipation in the worman and the girl grows as they imagine future judgments of their looks by others…. Upon closer inspection, this is no trivial act. There is concentrated effort here: studied initation, a deliberate process of replication bridging a generation gap, between an adult notion of 'beauty' and a child's notion, not yet formed. There is a ceremonial sharing of information, an induction into secrets and codes of beautification a transference of power. But we begin to notice , this initiation is for women only. [93]

Figure 39, Carrie Mae Weemes, *Untitled* from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990

It has become a matter of debate, whether "an elusive ideal of beauty is a menacing, male-fabricated myth that victimises women or an avenue of self-realisation by which women become empowered agents." [94] My position is consistent with Hartney's view in her preface to *Beauty Matters*. "Why does beauty matter? Beauty flies in the face of a puritanical utilitarianism. It defies the reductiveness of both the political left and the political right in their efforts to bend it to a mission. Beauty subverts dogma by activating the realms of fantasy and

[92] Peg Zeglin Brand, (ed.), *Beauty Matters*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000, p1
[93] ibid, p1
[94] ibid, p3

imagination. It reminds us that the enjoyment of 'mere' pleasure is an important element of our humanity. And it knits the mind and body together when they seem all too easily divided."[95]

My attitude to feminine beauty has evolved over time and has been shaped in the first place and later revealed through my experience and study of western art. As I mentioned in my initial proposal the publication of a number of texts indicates a reappraisal of second-wave feminist thinking as it relates to two keys areas of my research: feminism and the body and feminism and fashion. Perceiving a shift in critical thinking gave me the freedom to re-appraise my own position. My response to the painter Ingres's portraits of women indicates the shifts which have occurred and the complexity of feeling which remains. In my Honours paper (2002) I wrote the following about Ingres.

> Ingres' female portraits had previously repelled me, however, my work this year led me to engage with him. His knowledge of feminine gesture, pose and sensuality is unsurpassed and his work has inspired key elements in at least three of my paintings: the central pose in *Self-Portrait 2*, the placing of the hands in *Self-Portrait 3*, the vertical, serpentine line in *Self-Portrait 4*.
>
> In the *Self-Portrait 2*, I wear a ball-dress; it is an artefact from the 1950s found in an op-shop early this year. Donning this article connects me to my mother while facilitating a shift within my project. In this portrait I play with the body language of Ingres' Mme de Rothschild and thereby also connect myself to her, a woman whose femininity and intellect are balanced. (Figure 40) Mme de Rothschild was an outsider, a Jewish woman, who ran a salon in Paris attended by the intellectuals of her day. The fact that she was an outsider (a Jewess) explains why Ingres portrays her in a manner which was somewhat shocking in its day. She leans forward in the picture plane and the colour of her dress is unexpected. Of the portrait the critic, L. de Geffroy, wrote, "…this portrait is somewhat of

[95] ibid, pxv

a surprise. The eye needs to get used to the luxurious reds which assault it." [96] He finds a perfection in this picture in all elements, the gesture, the velvet cushion, the skin-tone, in Mme de Rothschild's 'oriental' eyebrows.[97] For de Geffroy, colour and texture convey sensuality. Of all Ingres' portraits of women I find this one the most interesting – the subject represents not only a beautiful woman clothed in the elegant fashion of her day, but a woman of intellect, warmth and welcome. This is revealed by her body language – she sits forward, ready for conversation, and her body is revealed beneath her garments. These elements introduce an erotic quality, more like the women of Ingres' harem pictures, rather than his respectable, society figures. Yet her facial expression reveals a woman in charge of both her life and her femininity. She confidently accepts herself and her role in the world. She is the sensual intellectual. Understanding this painting provides a basis from which my project can move forward.

The portrait of the Baronesse de Rothschild is the only painting by Ingres I am completely comfortable with. Although the others have a seductive quality in their exquisite detail there is something cold about the women.

Figure 40, Dominique Ingres, *Betty de Rothschild*, 1848

[96] C. Ockman, *Ingres' Eroticised Bodies – Retracing the Serpentine Line*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1995, p67
[97] ibid, p 67

Our society and contemporary art seems to have a problem with concepts of beauty and aesthetics. We feel guilty about focussing too much attention on superficial notions of beauty. I have sought to undercut my own ambivalence from an inner voice accusing me of nostalgia and superficiality by using colours which are strong. Colour is subversive. Nancy Spero an American painter says 'Colour is the means of escape from the law, evidenced in the constant opposition between line and colour running through the history of western aesthetics, with colour as the secondary excluded term.'[98] There have been various positions debated about whether or not colour is associated with gender or not. In the post-Renaissance period colour was described as "the 'bawd' whose wiles and attractions lured spectators into trafficking with her sister, drawing".[99] In the nineteenth century "Charles Blanc stated categorically that 'drawing is the masculine sex of art and colour is the feminine sex' and for this reason colour could only be of secondary importance."[100] What has become clear to me within the project is a certain distaste for the colour pink which is stereotypically associated with a feminine aesthetic.

The logic of paint – Emily Kame Kngwarreye

The question, 'why paint', crops up perennially. The answer lies in the project's focus on the sensual and the intuitive. Paint is a fluid substance and has beguiled many artists who have refused to adhere to the 'painting is dead' mantra. Charlotte Mullins in *Painting People, the State of the Art* (2006) argues that painting's recent revival (particularly figurative) is because paintings create pauses in the 'rat-tat-tat' of images which bombard us daily; they are distillations of subjects rather than the unconnected snapshots which have taken over our lives.[101] As discussed in chapter one it leaves the mark of the body. My decision to

[98] Jon Bird, *Nancy Spero*, London, Phaidon, 1996, p50.
[99] John Gage, *Colour and Meaning, Art, Science and Symbolism*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1999, p35
[100] ibid, p35
[101] Charlotte Mullins, *Painting People, the state of the art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2006, p17

return to painting in 2001 occurred after seeing a painting by Emily Kame Kngwarreye the same year. I wrote these notes not long after the event.

> In June of 2001 I encounter a painting by Emily Kngwarreye in the National Gallery in Canberra. The mural scale painting of the dimensions of ‘Blue Poles’ sat between the Contemporary Art Space and the Aboriginal Collection. Sited between these two spaces a number of elements are instantly obvious. The painting is a meeting ground of two cultural traditions, twentieth century western desert aboriginal painting and contemporary European art with its diverse modes of expression. I’m seduced by the loose rhythmic dots which float and weave across the massive surface of this painting. The palette is not the traditional earth-tones I have previously encountered in aboriginal painting. It is more complex; Kngwarreye had been in Paris just prior to painting this work and was influenced by the ‘fauve’ painters she saw there. I respond to the serendipitous way in which new work is created – from established art, new styles emerge. It allows me to meet this tradition openly as a painter responding to a painting.
>
> It was the first time I was engulfed by painterly abstraction. I enjoyed the notion of an abstraction arising from personal experience. I approach my art practice through human experience. I have resisted abstract painting because it is associated with the modernist tradition in which male artists were still supreme. Just as women were entering art schools and mastering figuration its importance evaporated and abstract expressionism set up a new hierarchy, another discourse in which males could be dominant. This may seem like perverse logic but it is nonetheless relevant to my processes. This encounter begins a new direction.

Longing to return to painting but aware of the feminist position and of the predominance of installation and new media in the 1990s I found Knwarreye's work inspiring. I was also struck by the anomaly that the lives of aborigines were often so abject yet their art work is vibrant, joyous and celebratory. In April 2004, I wrote in my seminar paper “I am struck by Kngwarreye's freedom to explore the material pleasure of

paint. There is a sense of matter forming and dispersing with rhythmic fluidity The aboriginal tradition leaves its artists free to be painters. I will not sentimentalise their lives or the work and struggle engaged in their processes, however, this aspect of their cultural and spiritual heritage I envy. While the tradition has been reinvigorated by western influences, particularly in relation to the shift from bark to canvas and from natural ochres and earth colours to diverse acrylics, an artist such as Kngwarrye has maintained significant continuation of the tradition.

The potato yam provides the starting point for a great deal of her work. The potato yam is a root vegetable which spreads erratically under ground and is abundant after rain. It has a **r**hyzomic structure and is part of her everyday experience. Deleuze and Guattari give new importance to the concept of the rhizome in their essay "Rhyzome; an Introduction". As I read it, this concept provides a metaphor for post patriarchal structures – it's a non hierarchical structure antithetical to a root-tree model or 'arboresence which has dominated Western thought from Porphyrian trees, to Linnaen taxonomies, to Chomskyan sentence diagrams. Arborescences are hierarchical, stratified totalities which impose limitations and regulated connections between their components. Rhyzomes, by contrast, are non-heirarchical, horizontal multiplicities which cannot be subsumed within unified structure, whose components form random, unregulated networks in which any element can be connected to any other element.'[102] Reading this again I see links with contemporary post-modernist art practice, the combining of disparate elements by contemporary artists to invent new ways of seeing. This is also a process which has been potent within my project; leaving heirarchies behind and being open to new direction as they evolve.

The rhizome concept is all embracing for Kngwarreye; not just the potato yam but her fluid intuitive work processes. If we examine the

[102] Bogue, Ronald, *Deleuze and Guattari*, Routledge. London and New York, 1989, p107

artist's earlier work, small canvases from 1992, we observe a significant shift in her conception of what painting is, from ' a sequence of superimpositions - linear tracks or designs followed by screens of dots – laid on in successive dry states, with discernible separations of level shape and colour to painting conceived as a wet interactivity of all these elements". Her later paintings could be summed up as 'the painterly realisation of fluidity'.[103] This is something I have aspired to within my work. (Figures 41 & 42)

Figure 41. Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Summer Yams,* 1992 Figure 42. Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Winter Abstraction*, 1993

Realism in Modernist and Post-Modernist Painting– Gustave Courbet and Gerhardt Richter

[103] Smith, Terry, Kngwarreye Woman Abstract Painter', Donald Holt, *Emily Kngwarreye Paintings*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998, p32

Anthony Bond, the curator of the exhibition *Body*[104] and the author of the essay "Embodying the Real" develops themes which are relevant to my project.[105] In examining concepts of empathy rather than voyeurism he makes a crucial dis-tinction between classical and realistic modes of painting. Figurative works in the classical style he associates with voyeurism, and realistic modes, with empathy. "Artists like Ingres and Cabanel not only project their subjects into an exotic scenario, they also brush away any trace of the hand. It is as if they distance themselves from voyeurism facilitated by their art. Experiencing the realist works, in contrast, entails a full sensory engagement because in tracing the form, the viewer's eye follows the gesture of the artist. This process brings the viewer close to the artist and to the subject matter. In a way it is as if the viewer recreates the moment of production with each glance."[106] He writes about the trace of the artist's bodily presence and links this with twentieth century performance art practices. By replacing the objectifying and distancing conventions of academic painting with an emphasis on sensory and emotional engagement, the works of artists such as Courbet, Bonnard and Valadon create a closer connection between life and art. The *Body* exhibition reveals a closer connection between the work of certain contemporary artists and their nineteenth century predecessors. Many of the works selected emphasise an intimacy born of shared bodily sensations.[107]

It can be said that Realism began with Courbet, when he named a one-man show in 1855 'Le Realism, G. Courbet'. He sought to be true to his artistic conscience and rejected the then current academic notions of art which aspired to execute figures, objects and scenes in the tradition of Raphael; also known as the Grand Manner. Realism flourished, particularly in France. After Courbet came Manet. A large part of the

[104] *Body*, curator Anthony Bond, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 12 September – November 16, 1997
[105] Anthony Bond, *Body*, op.cit., pp11-80
[106] ibid, p12
[107] ibid, p13

movement to realism concerned a shift away from graduated shading and rendering objects and figures as they were known (by the trained eye), or conceived of; to the way they were perceived or seen by the eye in the course of daily life (rather than in the artificial light of the studio where objects were rendered through the trained eye). "Manet and his followers brought about a revolution in the rendering of colours which is almost comparable with the revolution in the representation of forms brought about by the Greeks. They discovered that, if we look at nature in the open we do not see individual objects each in its own colour but rather a medley of tones which blend in our eye or really in our mind."[108]

Julian Bell describes realism slightly differently. "It was *against* the 'idealist' tradition that Courbet – like his contemporaries in philosophy, the 'Positivists', headed by Auguste Comte – pitted himself. He was determined to get to grips with things." [109] He hoped that the closer he brought the viewer to the world the more the viewer would engage with it. He was a socialist and wanted to reveal the world of ordinary people and their hard (often back-breaking) work. He portrayed himself in shirtsleeves with his tools of trade on his back in *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* (1854).[110] *The Stonebreakers (Doubs)*[111] is the best known of Courbet's revolutionary realist paintings.

Gustave Courbet

The Body exhibition (1997) curated by Anthony Bond at the Art Gallery of NSW drew my attention to Courbet as a painter of significance to our time. An important essay on Courbet by Sarah Faunce entitled "Courbet: Feminist in Spite of Himself" was published

[108] E.H.Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London, Phaidon, Tenth Edition, 1963, p387
[109] Julian Bell, *What is Painting, Representation and Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson, 1999, p63
[110] Gustave Courbet, *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet (1854)* Montpelier Museum
[111] Gustave Courbet, *The Stonebreakers (Doubs)* 1849-50 Formerly in Gemalde Galerie, Dresden, now destroyed.

in the catalogue.[112] Of Courbet's painted female figures she says" we are not in an exotic world, nor in a library of reliable poses, but thrust into a reality of the here and now, and of the sexual energies of the female body as observed and constructed with a fresh eye. Courbet's lifelong battle with reality makes it possible to paint flesh that is erotic in the actual, not in the voyeuristic sense of the term." [113] According to Michael Fried, Courbet's model of realism is a corporeal mode of self-representation which diminishes the role of vision and favours the tactile and bodily relations of the painter to the act of painting.[114] Fried analyses Courbet's self-portraits not from the perspective of psychological or autobiographical studies of the artist's, or a reflection of the sitter's likeness, but as Courbet's "desire and compulsion" to depict his own embodiedness.

There are a number of peculiar characteristics in Courbet's work which have influenced my project. One is the proximity of the figures represented to the surface of the canvas; for example *The Grain Sifters* (1854-55) and *Wounded Man* (1844-54) (Figure 43) and secondly the predominance of states of sleep, reverie or semi-consciousness - *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine*, 1856-7 (Figure 44) and *The Source* 1868. The thematics of absorption, for instance, pervades *The Grain Sifters* 1854-5.[115] There is an emphasis on the process of painting rather than the product. There is an immersion in the act of painting rather than in the object-status of women depicted.

[112] Sarah Faunce "Courbet: Feminist in Spite of Himself" in Anthony Bond, op. cit., pp95 – 108
[113] Ibid, p108
[114] Michael Fried in "Courbet's Corporeal Realism: The Phenomenological Body and the Anti-Theatrical Tradition" by Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, Anthony Bond, op. cit., p109
[115] ibid, p114

Figure 43. (left) Gustave Courbet, *Wounded Man*, 1844-5; Figure 44 (right). Gustave Courbet, *The Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine*, 1856-7

Realism later achieved its crudest forms in the social realist work produced by various totalitarian regimes of Fascist Germany and the Stalinist Russia. The realist revival which occurred after abstract expressionism was aimed at opposing the critical consensus in favour of abstract art. In 1953 Edward Hopper joined forty-six artists in the United States and founded the journal *Reality*. "Painting", he stated, "will have to deal more fully and less obliquely with life and nature's phenomena before it can become great."[116] Subsequent realist approaches have been oblique in so far as they have been created via mediated forms of their subject matter - using a photographic source of the image to create the painting.

The Pop painters made paintings which were deliberately artificial rather than 'natural'. Their work lacked spatial depth and while not concerned to follow Greenberg their work benefitted from the abstract movement by appropriating the concern with the painted surface. Large unframed and flatly configured surface acquired a normative status after World War II. There was a shift from the Kandinsky model which supposed that the emotion or perception of the artist was transposed onto the canvas and retrieved by the viewer. Here the painter and viewer are carrying out a kind of work in front of the canvas. The

[116] Brendan Prendeville, *Realism in 20th Century Painting*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2000, p155

viewer is looking not at what the painter has seen but what he has done.[117]

The new art movements concentrated on the boundary between reality and illusion (or art).[118] Pop Art and Neo-Dadaism were classified as forms of realism because of their preoccupation with the everyday. The fifth Documenta exhibition in 1972, Kassel, Germany took as its theme, contemporary realism. In 1972, Linda Nochlin's book *New Realism* helped bring about a re-appraisal of earlier realism. She defended realism against Greenberg's formalism, and traced anti-realism through classicist art of earlier centuries. She acknowledged, however, that abstract art had influenced a diversity of contemporary realisms. Philip Pearlstein, who began his career as an abstract painter, is an excellent example.[119] His paintings are concerned with representing the static presence of his figures and their realisation is firmly three dimensional. However, formalist and abstract elements combine within his work to create an even focus and invite the eye to scan across the surface rather than to plunge into the depth of the illusion. *Female Nude on Platform Rocker* (1978) was painted with three daylight lights which created the clear articulation of anatomy as well as the sharp definition of shadows playing against each other. (Figure 45)

Figure 45, Phillip Pearlstein, *Female Nude on Platform Rocker*, 1978

[117] ibid, p158
[118] ibid, p160
[119] ibid, p173

An antagonism between abstract and realist artists persists. Linda Nochlin defended what she referred to as the 'crimes' of realism against abstract 'law', and wrote against the restrictiveness of the Greenberg doctrine. The more conspicuous kinds of realism broke the rule of 'flatness' and surface integrity. Photo-realists are surface-conscious depictors of surfaces. The reality of their paintings is usually artificial both physically and culturally.

Prendeville uses the concept of 'embedded matter' to describe contemporary realisms. They are not about describing things in the world but are about bringing the world into being. 'World,' in this sense, 'is never an object that stands before us, and can be seen, but is historical, cultural and collective; it is affective and social.' While this realism participates in the tradition concerned to depict what is in nature, framing an apparent depth, it is more about historical and social reality.[120] The realisms of the late twentieth century have been preoccupied with mediated reality coming out of popular culture and widespread as a result of the dissemination of images through the mass media.

Gerhardt Richter

Gerhardt Richter's work includes both abstraction and realism. He has influenced my project in a number of ways. He was a major figure in the revival of contemporary figure painting. Trained in the social realist tradition in East Germany, he was later influenced by Pop artists including Warhol and Lichtenstein. However, rather than the typical subject matter of pop, Richter focussed on found photographs. Later he created his own photographic source material. His idea is that painting is not a view of reality, painting is itself reality. His *Kitchen Chair* (1965) is 'reality produced by itself' in so far as the artist's role has been limited to selecting the photographic image and allowing the

[120] ibid, p183

medium of painting to re-present it. By contrast to van Gogh's famous chair, Richter's chair appears ordinary and banal. (Figure 46) When asked what function his realist paintings had Richter simply said 'sympathy'. [121] He is attached to the chair in the photograph he paints because it has acquired the patina of all things lived with. He is interested in the iconography of the everyday. The photograph in particular represent man's futile attempt to stem the futility of all life, an idea strongly held by Roland Barthes. "Death is the eidos of the Photograph"[122] Richter believes that as well as taking over the many functions which had been part of the tradition of painting the photograph in contemporary culture took on a religious function, they were like 'devotional pictures'.[123]

Figure 46. (left) Gerhardt Richter *Kitchen Chair* 1965. Figure 47 (right) Gerhardt Richter, *Ema (Nude on a Staircase),* 1966

When Richter began painting his family he departed from the grey and added soft naturalistic colours to his palette. The first of these pictures created with his own camera was *Ema (Nude on Staircase)* 1966. (Figure 47) The title refers to Duchamp's iconoclastic *Nude Descending a Staircase,* 1912 and functions as counter-iconoclasm. It

[121] ibid, p167
[122] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans, Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981, p15
[123] Robert Storr, *Gerhardt Richter: Forty Years of Painting*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2002, p39

is also an inversion of the readymade because it is based on a photograph Richter took. While it is a witty entry into the discourse on painting the work remains a tender portrayal of his private reality.

Richter's importance within my project lies not just in his subject matter - in particular the use of his family intimates to create paintings rather than portraits. I am also drawn to his seductive surfaces. His oeuvre takes in all styes of painting from the late twentieth century. A reproduction of his painting *Betty* (1988) is one I have had on my studio wall throughout this project. (Figure 48) The painting is based on a photograph of Richter's daughter but her head is turned away and so we learn nothing of her identity. The painting is concerned with contemporary discourse concerning photography, painting and representation however I am drawn to it as a painting about sensuality and decoration. Richter has also painted tender images of his wife and son. (Figure 49)

Figure 48. (left) Gerhardt Richter, *Betty* (1988), Figure 49. (right) Gerhardt Richter, *S with Child*, 1999

One of Richter's trademark styles is his blurring of the original image painted. In some cases this technique is used to create the image and

then erase it. For example Uncle Rudi (1965) represents a figure in many German families not discussed after the war. (Figure 50) He was very young and handsome and was killed early in the war. It was included in an exhibition in Berlin in memory of the victims of Lidice, an infamous atrocity committed by German troops in Czechoslovakia. Richter eventually donated it to the Czech Museum of Fine Arts. In other works the blurring reminds us that the painting is not a photograph but it also contributes a soft ambience and lyricism to his work.

Figure 50. Gerhardt Richter, *Uncle Rudi*, 1965

Other artists

There are other artists, all painters, who form a context for the project. The most important of these is Suzanne Valadon. The contemporary Australian painters, Vivienne Binns, Davida Allen and provide a local contemporary context which has only been clear to me in the final stage of the project. There is one male painter of children who has been important in revealing a problematic approach to a shared subject matter; Balthus.

The modernist painter, Suzanne Valadon, came to my attention early in the project and her sense of embodied pleasure was influential. In 1996 there was the first major retrospective of her work in Switzerland

curated by Daniel Marchesseau.[124] Valadon led an unconventional life working as an artist's model, raising her son as a single mother, having numerous affairs and eventually commanding respect as a serious painter from Degas and Lautrec. Her major themes were women at their toilette, reclining nudes and interior scenes. Importantly in relation to my project in Valadon's female nudes we encounter a woman painter who has a sense of ease with the female nude body. Daniel Marchesseau describes Valadon's nudity as neither sensuous nor vulgar, noting she shared a sisterly camaraderie with her models.[125] *Nu a la Couverture Rayée* (1922) is a depiction of a female body which represents female pleasure in embodiment. (Figure 51) In this picture Valadon makes much of the carpet and the striped bed-cover. In *La Chambre Bleu (*1923), made in response to Manet's *Olympia*, Valadon rejects Manet's idea of objectifying the gaze of nineteenth male century artists. Her heroine is self-absorbed, clothed and smokes a cigarette.[126] (Figure 52) There are numerous intimate and honest nude studies of children including drawing and paintings. *La Poupée Delaiisée* 1921 inspired one of the series of works for the thesis exhibition; it is discussed in detail in chapter three. (Figure 52)

[124] Daniel Marchesseau, (curator) *Suzanne Valadon 1865-1938*, 1996, Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, Suisse
[125] ibid, pp16-7
[126] Anthony Bond, op. cit., p15

Figure 51. (left) Suzanne Valadon, *Nu a la Couverture Rayé,e* 1922, Figure 52. (right) Suzanne Valadon, *La Poupée Delaissée* ,1921

Figure 53. Suzanne Valadon, *La Chambre Bleu*, 1923

Balthus' paintings of young girls have been within my conscious visual vocabulary right throughout the project. As a feminist I find his work evokes strong ambivalence; his portrayal of young girls repels because of its voyeuristic position, however his painterly surfaces have been influential and there is a feminine quality in their decorative surfaces. (Figure 54)

Figure 54. Balthus *Le Chat au Mirroir I*, 1977-80

Vivienne Binns is a major figure in the feminist art movement in Australia and her work has been acknowledged in a survey show entitled *Vivienne Binns* (2006-7).[127] I have been interested in her work for some time and but her contextual relevance to my own project has only recently become clear to me. It is her life-long commitment to celebrating the lives of ordinary women and unknown artists (presumably often women) which provides an important context for my own work. Her best known project *Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories* (1980) covers ground which relates to my own project in so far as my project has sought to acknowledge the contribution of my maternal heritage, the lives of those who were mothers in the 1950s and 1960s.Through *MMOM* Binns lifts/transforms the creative efforts of a generation of women into a major work which pays tribute to the gracious, often humble but ordered and well-lived lives of the post-war generation. According to Binns the interaction of those involved was one of the most important aspects of the project. [128] Her more recent work centres on pattern and modernism within the domestic sphere; it is another way in which she focuses our attention on the lives of ordinary women whose lives were embedded in their domestic environment. *In Memory of the Unknown Artist: Woven Plastic Cloth,*

[127] *Vivienne Binns*, Merryn Gates (curator), Hobart, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 2006
[128] Vivienne Binns, in Catriona Moore, op. cit., p71

Gift from Ruth Waller (1996) is a good example. (Figure 55) When I saw Binns survey exhibtion last year it was the work *Vag Dens* (1967) with its expressive and joyous celebration of female sexuality which held my attention. (Figure 56)

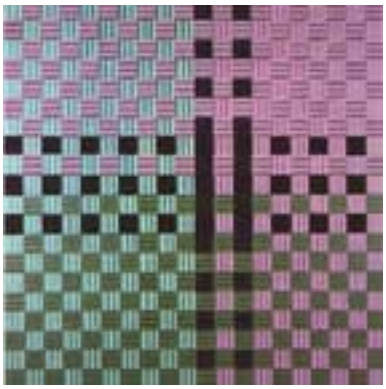

Figure 55. *In Memory of the Unknown Artist: Woven Plastic Cloth, Gift from Ruth Waller*, 1996

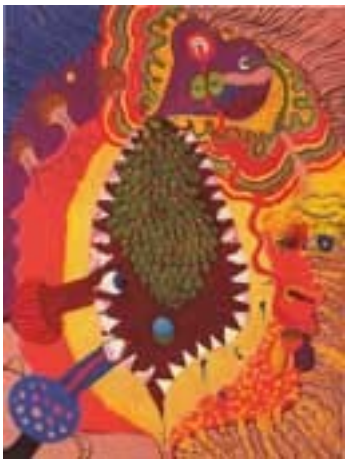

Figure 56. Vivienne Binns, *Vag Dens*, 1967

Angela Brennan's work explores the same broad concepts of the feminine *jouissance*/feminist dichotomy using abstraction, and to a much lesser degree figuration. In the catalogue produced for a survey of her work in 2006 by Monash University Museum of Art, Max Delany describes her paintings as "exemplary of a loosening up of the

perceived strictures of late-modernist formalism. She was celebrated for introducing social reference and quotidian experience into the supposedly autonomous realm of abstract art. Brennan's work was also understood as representative of a feminine *jouissance*, a libidinous play, exceeding the laws of the modernist canon and its heroic language and order."[129] (Figures 57 & 58) The work of these two important female painters may well be seminal in the next stage of my work.

Figure 57. (left) Angela Brennan, *Blue Interior with nude,* 2006
Figure 58. (right) Angela Brennan, *Princess Tevhide in her wedding costume 1873*, 2005

Davida Allen is another Australian artist whose work I have come back to from time to time. Until recently her work, however, always seemed outside of her time in its playful eroticism. Her subject is almost exclusively her own everyday domestic life with her family. I have enjoyed the expressive and extravagant way in which she uses paint to build up a depth of surface and her wild, intuitive and joyous use of colour. It is however, only more recently that I see a relationship between her concerns and my own. (Figure 59)

[129] Max Delaney and Dr Kyla McFarlane (curators) *Angela Brennan, Every Morning I wake up on the Wrong Side of Capitalism,* A Survey Exhibition, Monash University of Art 21 June – 26 August 2006, p3

Figure 59 Davida Allen, *Sisters*, 1991

Summary

Disparate elements acted as triggers and coalesced to give my project a personal coherence and a broad art historical context. The most important included my own dream experiences and maternal memorabilia, Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* (first viewed, 1976), *Audrey Hepburn at the Powerhouse* (viewed, 2000), Emily Kngwarreye, National Gallery (viewed, 2001), and Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (read, 1972; re-read, 2003). Feminism's revising of the canon, in particular, Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon*, opened up the work of two painters of the Madonna/mother and child, Giovanni Bellini and Mary Cassatt. Post-modernism's re-positioning of the interior and decoration (the corollary of its rejection of the masculinist aesthetic of High Modernism) as a subject for contemporary artists brought attention to the artists Vuillard, Vermeer and Hammershoi. Courbet, whose relevance has recently re-emerged has provided an important context; this is because of a return to realism and a new interest in the body. The theoretical context arises from several important texts written predominantly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, chief among these are texts by Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, Helen McDonald, and Anne Higgonet. The artists who provide a context for the work come from various periods: from the Renaissance (Bellini) and the period of early Modernism, Mary Cassatt,

Vuillard, Courbet, Suzanne Valadon and from contemporary realist painting practice Balthus and Gerhardt Richter. The contemporary Australian painters – Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Vivienne Binns, Davida Allen and Angela Brennan provide a local context. The last three artist are concerned with painting and women's issues; crucially they use the language of paint to raise our consciousness about the feminine in contemporary culture.

Chapter 3 How the project was pursued in the studio

This chapter will outline how the project was developed in the studio. The project falls into three main stages. The first stage is from March 2003 – November 2004.[1] This involved the earliest experiments and culminated in the exhibition I curated at the Carnegie Gallery, Hobart in November 2004. The second stage is from January 2005 – March 2006 and it includes the first thesis works, the Ella paintings, and two of the Mathilda paintings which were exhibited at Entrepot, School of Art, Hobart in a solo exhibition entitled *Rapport* March 2006. During this period I had a residency at the Rosamund McCulloch Studio at the Cite Internationale in Paris. In the final stage, seven paintings were completed, the four Phoebe paintings and three Tess paintings. Much of this discussion will be taken from seminar papers and journal entries written over the course of the project.

The first stage: March 2003 – November 2004
Early experiments; Brown paper works;
Paintings for *Propinquity and Distance*

The project began in March 2003. The early months were spent reading as widely as I could. However, from the beginning I set out to establish a disciplined studio practice. This was difficult at first as my direction was not clear. It was however an essential part of the development of the thesis. The following section describes the earliest experiments and was written for a seminar presentation in April 2004.

> In the studio I was painting small-scale, cropped details of myself contrasting flesh with cloth, of various kinds, and its decorations, (satin, sequins, carpet, velvet, glass beads) and considering the question of whether this project would be self-portraiture or female portraiture

[1] During this period there was a six month suspension due to a broken leg.

> generally. At the same time I experimented with 'photo-sketching',[2] initially I attempted to direct a photo-shoot of myself by someone else. This had been important in previous self-portraits. I was investigating whether there was a specifically feminine way of viewing/depicting the sensual experience of seeing or touching cloth within the context of self-portraiture. However, it seemed almost impossible to eliminate the male photographer's view from the photos (I was using my husband as photographer). The photos were sexualised in ways I hadn't expected. I dressed in an op-shop evening dress from the 60s with decorative décolletage and a very long slit up the leg. In the photos there was too much cleavage and not being behind the lens I was unable to edit as I went. So I turned photographer and used a model in place of myself. I would paint another woman. However, she would have to be a woman who fitted the look – kindly, intelligent, elegant. She wore my 1960s op-shop dress and I showed her the portrait of Baronnesse de Rothschild. This experiment failed also to spark inspiration. I created images which were both a combination of that person and myself. However I wasn't comfortable in the director's role with the model and I felt constrained by the highly constructed nature of finding the pose. I returned to ink drawing, a medium which I have always enjoyed. I drew freely accepting that I was at an impasse.

As mentioned in chapter one of the exegesis these small formatted cropped details were the *punctum* of the Honours self-portraits. In all, there were three completed small paintings, entitled Flesh/Cloth and four partially completed works as well as collection of photo-sketches, ink drawings and watercolour drawings. (Figure 7).

Other themes were explored at this time. I was simultaneously studying images of women throughout history and researching feminist art since the 1960s. I read Helene Cixous's classic "The Laugh of The Medusa"

[2] The photo-sketch is a compound noun I made up to refer the way I use photography to investigate ideas. The camera is a tool to collect data even when I'm unsure of what form my ideas may take or even precisely what my subject matter might be. This draws on the idea of the artist's sketch, a tool used in the early development of an image, to sort out subject matter and composition or possible visual elements of interest to consider later.

(1976), and Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) captured my attention. It gave form to Cixous' notion of the revolutionary idea of women's laughter. (Figure 60) I found this image less self-conscious, and less driven by a didactic agenda than much other feminist art of the same period. There was extraordinary freedom, vitality, sensuality and joy in the image of the bodies and flesh, male and female. The work was condemned by some of her contemporary feminist colleagues. Consequently, Schneeman left the US for Europe in 1969 where she remained for four years. I made an ink drawing of the image.

Figure 60, *Meat Joy*, 1964, Carolee Schneeman and Dorothea Rockburn in performance by Al Giese

My work seemed to slow, but my thinking gradually cleared and the concept of the intimate portrait emerged. My husband took photographs of my son and me at this stage. The notion of intimate portraiture came from Picasso (who would only paint his intimate circle) and Vuillard and from the writings of Virgina Woolf (especially, *To the Lighthouse*). With some apprehension, I resolved to create images from home. This felt like a dangerous decision as I had internalised the anti-domestic Modernist dogma and I was aware of widespread accounts in the media dealing with incest which commonly occurred in the home. Nonetheless, the work took me in this direction. A relational theme was now emerging: there would be two figures in each composition, usually a parent and a child, although in some early sketches there were three children. I took photographs (often at home) as the moment inspired me, and without any sense of composition. It emerged that this was a way of recording gestures and interactions which I was unable to "take

in" (see) as they were happening. These photographs were of my son and husband, or friends and their children in our home.

The works from this early stage were included in the exhibition *Propinquity and Distance.* In a seminar paper in April 2004 I drew together the significant outcomes of this stage.

> … my meeting with Vuillard's works led to a small suite of paintings which were executed initially on brown paper and later repainted on linen. These helped me sort out more precisely where my content would be sourced. In the series of five works there were three paintings of a girl with her mother and two paintings of my son and husband. These were intended as studies of intimacy between parent and child where there was physical closeness between the figures but psychological independence. In each case the child was absorbed in his/her activity, psychologically independent of the parent figure. States of absorption, moments suspended and caught in paint (as pigment is suspended in its emulsifying agent). The intense feeling and looking into the handbag, the trying-on of glasses, the sorting through of old toys, feeling beads, the determination needed to master the fine motor skill of doing up a clasp, the painting of toenails, the dance. These may be quiet activities, they are all however active not passive states and they are about the acquisition of skill and allow for the development of competence and thereby independence. Each action has been initiated by the child, recorded by camera and turned into a painting. The equivalent in Eriksonian theory of child developmental is 'industry'. These paintings were also experimental works; I explored flattening the picture plane and interspersing saturated flat colour with decoration and pattern. Patterning was inspired by my enjoyment of Vuillard's free use of pattern; conceptually patterning is important because it is a link with my maternal forebears. A deliberate strategy has been to make connections back to the energy of my maternal heritage which contains diverse and unique elements.

This work was preparatory to the overall project. The final work, *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair,* eventually stood out as the transitional piece from this series, and from it came the final works. (Figure 14)

Conceptually the project is about femininity, albeit as a learned behaviour, and the mother daughter relationship in a domestic setting. The works are portraits of women's lives. The figures do not confront the viewer's gaze (a contemporary device used in my Honours project), nor are we invited to focus on seeing as a way of being in the world (the dominant mode in western portraiture). The eyes are turned away or when they are visible, they invite us to consider the interiority of the figure. They are absorbed in activity or their own thoughts. We enter the interior world of the figures. The paintings are a play on interiority: interiors within interiors. Luminous, saturated colour and pattern, randomly collaged and loosely and intuitively painted, the use of diagonal elements to create an informal atmosphere, shallow pictorial space: these were the painterly elements which emerged from this first series. Colour in this series is deliberately cacophonous. Throughout this early stage and for the duration of the project, I struggled with the notion that painting and figuration were possibly less relevant in contemporary art practice. This view has dogged painting in the postmodernist era after Donald Crimp's essay in 1981 "The End of Painting" and Yves-Alain Bois "Painting: the Task of Mourning" 1986. After being in Paris and London in 2005 I felt stronger about my chosen medium; however, it was an issue that created tension throughout my project.

Importantly the project has shifted away from (self-)portraiture to the broader genre of figurative painting. Charlotte Mullins's recent book *Painting People, the state of the art* (2006) notes that figure painting since the turn of the millennium is having a major revival, favoured by artists, curators, critics and collectors alike. [3] The medium (painting) with its focus on the human figure in a domestic contemporary context and the theoretical framework of the project are current; however, the artists who form the context at this stage are modernist or Renaissance painters whose work has become the subject of reinvestigation in the

[3] Charlotte Mullins, op.cit., p9

latter part of the twentieth century and early part of the twenty-first century.

Middle stage of project, January 2005 – March 2006, the Ella series; Paris residency - Cite Internationale des Arts, April – May 2005; beginning of the Mathilda series

The Ella paintings commenced a new phase. From the beginning, my intention had been to place the figures in spaces in which the dream of the mother (the child's fantasy of the warm connected mother, my own mother) could be projected. *Ella 1* (*Girl in White Dress*) was completed in early 2005, before my residency in Paris at the Cite Internationale. (Figure 61) While the rudiments of the project were clear, how its concepts would find formal expression was less certain. I began by taking photographs (approximately 50) of Ella (two years old) and her mother Kirsten (they are part of my broader family circle). Kirsten was drawn to my project through the Orlaith paintings, in particular *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*. Her empathic response was the trigger to the project moving forward. To avoid being too prescriptive, I outlined only two points: firstly that I was investigating the intimate connection of mother and daughter and secondly that I was not interested in the face as a focal point. I wanted my subjects to interact freely. This, of course, was difficult, in a somewhat artificial situation. I helped select clothing, as I wanted to paint clothing of striking colour, decoration or texture. The girl's dress is an iconic little girl's dress. I initially substituted white with yellow but for formal reasons, I stayed with white. This felt problematic because I kept hearing the popular song from the *Sound of Music* "Girls in white dresses…" Overall the clothes in this series are simple, contemporary and fashionable. The black bag used as a prop was an op-shop find, an evening bag circa the 50s, and part of my small collection of artefacts of women's clothing and

accessories.[4] It can be argued that the black evening bag signifies female sexuality. The yellow bag and the pearls belonged to the mother. I had anticipated using other objects including a collection of percussive bells to bring in the sense of hearing, but once the little girl saw her mother's pearls, she could not be distracted from them. Accordingly, the work was only partly directed by me - a large part was created by the models themselves. This was a significant development in my approach and allowed the project to move forward. It created a distance between my way of working with female models and my male predecessors' way, leaning toward a dialogic model and away from an exploitative model which Meskimmon argues had characterised the way male artists had worked with their female nude models.

Figure 61. Mary Pridmore, *Ella 1* (or *Girl in White Dress)*, 2005

It took me six weeks to settle on an image. This gestation period between collecting data (photo sketching) and working up the image into a painting, I learned was an essential part of my creative process.

[4] In an essay by Helen Grace and Ann Stephen "Where do positive images come from? And what does a woman want?" a point is made about the use of accessories within pornographic imagery. Helen Grace and Ann Stephen, Catriona Moore, op.cit., p86

There were times when this distillation process (from idea to painting) took longer.

A journal entry of February 2004 records how I saw the images at this time.

> I had reservations about how the images would be read. Were they too sentimental? There seemed something conventional in the props. However, there seemed to be sufficient ambiguity in *Ella 1* to warrant using it as an idea for a painting. The angle of view gives prominence to the bag which lies open like a mouth, a vagina or even a trap which could spring shut. The girl is engaged in the task of mastering the skill of opening the clasp. This is a child and mother at work. By offering the bag of pearls to the girl the mother is involved in the activity (skill acquisition and developing acquaintance with female paraphernalia). This also alludes to the fact that femininity is a socially constructed mode of behaviour. The mother is slipping out of the frame. We see her hand and her legs and black shoes. Her short skirt is typical of the fashion of the day but it does reveal her to be a sexualised being.

I experimented with the strong field of green on the couch as an abstract element, which would work as a distinct and strong figurative element within the picture, as the Madonna's blue cloak does in the Bellini paintings. The green couch was in the original photograph, however, in *Ella 1,* I shifted the tone to create an acidic green. To increase its intensity I built up the green with a number of glazes. This was to undercut the sentimentality of the picture. In *Ella 3,* the colour is more a viridian green. This was a colour my mother loved. She had a magnificent beaded ball dress in this colour, and the last elegant outfit I remember her in was an Audrey Hepburn style, elegant 1960s suit in the same colour. The strong colour was used for the couch to elevate the space between the figures. The treatment of the figures shifted. While not wanting to paint flesh in the classical tradition as a seamless surface I nonetheless wanted to express in paint my enjoyment of flesh as a luminous and distinctive element. This was achieved by using thin layers of semi-opaque paint. The process would begin with a sketch in

diluted red sienna. To blow up the image I would use an overhead projector to throw the dimensions of the image onto the prepared surface. The resolution of the painting was gradual.

The second painting *Ella 2* (or *The Yellow Purse*) is a close-up, frontal view of the girl delving her hand into the yellow silk purse. (Figure 62) I used the bright yellow purse as a cacophanous element. We see the fleshy underside of her foot. She is completely absorbed in her task. I considered whether this image could be viewed voyeuristically. As the painting developed, this was a less important issue. Again, I intensified the green chair by painting it several times and this worked in opposition to the figuration, creating a play between abstraction and realism. The mother is slipping even further out of the frame. This is a less successful image than *Ella 1,* because it has less ambiguity and eroticism.

Figure 62. Mary Pridmore *Ella II*, (or *The Yellow Purse*), 2005

Figure 63. Mary Pridmore, *Ella III*, (or *Mother in Red*), 2005

The first two images in the Ella series, *Ella 1* and *Ella 2*, led to the work which I titled originally *Mother in Red*, and is now *Ella 3* (Figure 63). In between I commenced another in this series, however, its composition was too static and conventional and I abandoned the painting at quite an early stage. There were a few other sketch paintings attempted at this time which I realise now were attempts to free myself from the tighter representational style of the Ella series. They were incomplete and unsatisfactory but probably facilitated the loosening of paint application which occurred after this time. I considered an alternative title, *The Space Between*, because the space between the two figures (at the centre of the picture) was the important new element. This small shift led to the opening up of the space around the figures in

the subsequent paintings. The image also brought the mother somewhat back into the picture; she has begun to slip outside the frame in the second picture. The previous two paintings seemed to have been more focussed on the child. In this painting the mother and the daughter both look into the black bag – but there is a space between them. The mother has moved away and separated herself physically, whereas in the first two images, the child is spatially more important. There is an awkwardness in the way the little girl sits. There was no intention to draw on Mary Cassatt's *Portrait of a Little Girl (Girl in a Blue Armchair)* (Figure 64), but its influence can be felt. Like Ella, the young girl in Cassatt's painting is sitting with her legs apart, a pose which would have been read perjoratively in its time, when 'unladylike' poses were never painted. Contemporary audiences recognise the pose immediately as a relaxed, unselfconscious position. Cassatt has captured a young girl, bored, and sitting in a chair which is too large for her, and so her legs are splayed. It shows the easy disregard that small girls have for social etiquette, a quality which would have been frowned on in 1878, but in our time is recognized as natural. Returning to my picture, the mother is presented as a beautiful muscular figure – this is a young woman in her sexual prime. The colour of her dress is red to suggest her sexuality.

Figure 64. Mary Cassatt, *Portrait of a Little Girl* (*Girl in a Blue Armchair*, 1878

In the Ella series, female paraphernalia (the evening bag, the pearls, the

yellow silk purse) became important, even though that was not my original intention. The Ella works evolved against my better judgement at times! I felt as though I was going against my grain. I later saw this as prejudice. The theme of sexuality (both the mother's and the daughter's) begins to emerge at this time; the idea that the paintings can signify life beyond girlhood, that is, foreshadowing female, adult sexuality. The daughter's safe entrance into adulthood is the axis through which the mother will regain her freedom. The pearls and the purse are symbolic objects which resonate with my earlier work (the Honours self-portraits) where the metonymic relationship of these kind of objects to my mother was established. A number of the shifts in content in the Ella paintings signal a return to the underlying themes of my Honours work: the importance of maternal heritage, the linking of one generation to another, and the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next. In these works the knowledge is confined to the rituals of femininity, which I argue, can empower women in the world.

There is, however, a completely new element in the Ella paintings, to which the psychological term 'flow' can be applied. Flow, in this sense, refers to the mental state in which a person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, characterized by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity, a concept first used by psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He described flow as involving the following factors:

1) *Clear goals* (…goals are attainable and align appropriately with one's skill set and abilities). *2) Concentrating and focusing*, a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention (a person engaged in the activity will have the opportunity to focus and to delve deeply into it). 3) A *loss of the feeling of self-consciousness*, the merging of action and awareness.

4) *Distorted sense of time* - one's subjective experience of time is altered.

5) Direct and immediate *feedback* (successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that behavior can be adjusted as needed).

6) *Balance between ability level and challenge* (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult).

7) A sense of personal *control* over the situation or activity.

8) The activity is *intrinsically rewarding*, so there is an effortlessness of action.

9) *Action awareness merging*, when in the flow state, people become absorbed in their activity, and focus of awareness is narrowed down to the activity itself. [5]

Flow is so named because during interviews conducted by Csikszentmihalyi in 1975, several people described their 'flow' experiences using the metaphor of a current carrying them along. The psychological concept of *flow* as becoming absorbed in an activity is thus unrelated to the older phrase ‘to go with the flow’ which means ‘to conform’ and has some reflection in the East in the indefinable ‘Tao’ (path or way) of Taoism. I include this analysis in detail because it elaborates a quality which emerged in the Ella series and which became a central component of the thesis. Flow has been created by allowing my models to follow their own individual predilections; Ella’s fascination with the pearls and doing up the clasp, Mathilda’s enjoyment in wearing her dress, Phoebe’s painting with nail varnish and Tess’s dancing. There is their pleasure in accomplishment or near accomplishment. The girls are unaware of themselves and time is altered because they are absorbed and don’t notice time passing. This altered mind state, going outside yourself, is associated with intense pleasure. Attention to the concept of ‘flow’ for the developing child by a parent or primary caregiver is essential to the development of the child into adulthood. This is related to what Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts refer to as the ‘thematics of absorption’ in their essay on Courbet *The Sifters*. [6]

In the Ella series, and in the paintings which follow, the children are in active, meditative states; a form of reverie or psychological play, not to be confused with the passive states in which the female nude is depicted. It was at this stage that I realised the works were also a form

[5] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York, Harper 1996, p.72
[6] Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts, in Anthony Bond, *Body*, op.cit., p 114

of self-portraiture. Up until this point I had come to believe that the paintings were principally about the contemporary mothers and daughters who were my models and who had actively engaged in the process of making the work. It came as a shock (which was both pleasurable and confronting) when in a critique session a senior academic described *Ella I* as depicting a moment of separation between the child and the mother. This simple description made me realise that I was restaging my own childhood from the time when my mother first became ill until she left home. I was exactly on puberty when my mother left home for good and even though I was already at boarding school it was a profoundly traumatic experience.

The Ella paintings have achieved a multi-layered quality; they are an amalgam of experience (my mother's, my own, and the mothers and daughters who are my models) and time (past and present). I'm reminded of *Burnt Norton*, the first of the *Four Quartets* which my mother loved, in which TS Eliot alludes to the strange morphing of time where past and present merge in.

> *What might have been and what has been*
> *Point to one end, which is always present,*
> (1, *5—10*)

Mathilda Series

The photographs for the Mathilda series were shot in early 2005, before I went to Paris. The models for this series were family friends. Inspired by Suzanne Valadon's *La Poupée Delaissée* 1921which depicts a girl and her mother, I decided to set the figures in the main bedroom. (Figure 52) (Perhaps the work of Eric Fischl was an unconscious trigger). The Valadon image has a mother-figure (more likely a grandmother) who is drying a young girl after her bath. Bathing was a favourite theme of Valadon's. This girl is tall – perhaps ten years old. Her breasts are well formed and made more prominent by the way in which the girl's body twists around. Her left breast is seen in profile.

Her girlishness is made manifest by a number of key elements, her doll on the floor, the pink bow on her head. She is turning to examine herself in the mirror, this detail signals her self-consciousness and also foreshadows her future; that her looks will facilitate or otherwise her passage through the world. (Valadon was a beautiful woman and was a model before she became a painter. Her face and figure are enshrined in the art canon through the work of Renoir, *Dance at Bourgival* 1883, *City Dance* 1883, *Girl Braiding her Hair* 1885.) The girl is poised between childhood and womanhood. There is nothing sentimental about the image of the sturdy mother-figure tenderly drying the young girl after her bath. The setting, the girl's bedroom, includes the decorative elements which formed the other subject in Valadon's figure paintings. The striped bedcover is red and is symbolic of the girl's approaching adult sexuality. The rug is geometric in a warm oatmeal colour. It is small but it grounds the legs of the figures.

The domestic interior is a private domain; the marital bedroom is its most private space. In the Mathilda series I had decided to reintroduce pattern into this series. As it happened, the bedspread was a decorative cotton floral common in the late 1980s or early 1990s, predating the preoccupation of contemporary interior design with minimalism. I work with existing materials owned by the families. The mother is dressed in denim with a casual long sleeved jumper. The girl wears her 'good' dress, a 'mini'. She is glad to 'frock up' for the photos. The dress has a soft-edged semi abstracted floral in soft blues and greens, and reveals her long elegant legs. It was late afternoon, in autumn, when the sun is lower in the sky and goes down with a terrible intensity. So, by chance, there was strong light coming in the window. I took only 14 photographs and from these selected the images to paint. The inside/outside axis, represented by the strong light coming in the window, signifies the world beyond and is a central compositional element in this series. It's implied in *Mathilda I*, but is clearly visible in *Mathilda II* and *Mathilda III*.

Figure 65. Mary Pridmore, *Mathilda 1* or *Curled Up*, 2005

Paris residency, April – May 2005

Mathilda 1 (or *Curled Up*) was painted just after I returned from Paris. (Figure 65) There is a noticeable loosening in the work from this time onwards. My primary goal in Paris, including a short visit to London, was to saturate myself in painting. Of course, I had particular painters I wanted to look at; from the Renaissance Giovanni Bellini and Leonardo da Vinci, the Dutch painters Vermeer and Rembrandt, from the classical period Elizabeth Vigée le Brun and Dominiques Ingres, the French realist painter Courbet, the Spanish painter Goya, the French intimistes Vuillard and Bonnard and Mary Cassatt, and the contemporary painters Marlene Dumas and Gerhardt Richter. I was also drawn to others: Manet, Rothko, Goya, Rembrandt, Valloton, Velasquez, and Piero della Francesca. I went daily to art museums and galleries.

In the studio, I worked with gouache in my sketchbook, experimenting with compositional elements for the Mathilda series. The patterned

elements grew stronger and the figure receded; in some sketches I experimented with the figure as a camouflaged element within the overall structure. I talked with other artists about my ideas, always attempting to refine my research question. The residency gave me confidence about my direction, that is, the mother-daughter relationship within a domestic setting. An artist from Detroit, Kathleen McShane, responded positively to my working process, and the way I encouraged my models to be active participants in the creation of the work. [7]This is not what is referred to in Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics,* although, it contains some of the same core notions.[8] Bourriaud's ideas concern the viewer completing the artwork in some way by his/her interaction with it. The involvement of my models in the making of the artwork (dialogue rather than prescription) became a key element of the research. It created an open-ended process and allowed a more contemporary element to enter the work.

Although I had resolved to focus my project on the domestic, reservations about this decision remained. I now believe these came from the influence of my early academic training in literature regarding modernism. I spent several hours discussing ideas with a colleague from Israel, Dvora Morag, who introduced me to the work of Jessica Benjamin and Vilhelm Hammershoi. After this time, a number of things happened which took my project forward. In summary, my application of paint became looser and lighter and more confident, my compositions were less awkward and the work, less didactic.

I will conclude this section with the notes written in my journal not long after returning from Paris in July 2005.

> Most importantly I realised how diverse the language of paint can be and also felt a renewed confidence in it as a contemporary medium. As a

[8] Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copela, France, Les Presses du Reel, 2002

> painter I sometimes succumb to the view that this is an old technology. One reason I keep painting although I have used other media and will continue to do so, is because I see it as part of the language of ordinary people. It is one of my intentions to have a practice which sits both within the contemporary academy but also which can speak to those outside.

Just before I left Paris (mid-June, 2005), the *Big Bang, Creation and Destruction in 20th Century Art*, opened at the Pompidou Centre. Its final theme, "Re-enchantment", featured only two works and included a major video installation by Bill Viola entitled, *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001)[9]. There was a mood here which mirrored back some of my own aspirations. The catalogue states: "There are some who say that life is impossible without hope…" [10] I felt joy, hope and exhilaration while watching this work.

Mathilda I offers an overhead view of the young girl whose hair is being brushed by her mother, as she lies on her mother's bed. The sensual arabesque pattern on the fabric softens the image overall, and creates an impression of a garden of earthly delights to which the figure of the girl belongs. The bedspread is painted loosely so that while the motifs of the bud, the flower, the leaf and the dragon-fly are in the pattern, overall we read the pattern as an harmonic yet asymmetric rhythm of curving lines. Curves are repeated in the serpentine posture of the girl lying with her legs curled and tucked up. The girl is twirling a beaded hairclip. The textures (hair, metal, flesh, cotton, beads, wool) and patterns in this painting take prominence over the gestural elements. I had hoped to collapse the figure into the bedcover ground, but this didn't work. To this end, I used warm flesh tones in the bedspread to bring it closer to the figure, however, to fully integrate the figure with the ground meant taking the work away from its realistic representation toward a greater level of abstraction. The colours in this series have moved away from the high key acidic colour in the Ella

[9] Grenier, C., *Big Bang, Creation and Destruction in 20th Century Art*, Pompidou Centre, Paris, 2005
[10] Ibid, p7

series. To coalesce the relationship between the figure and the ground I used soft blues and greens for the girl's dress. The smaller pattern of the bedspread is dominant and the other patterns and elements become subservient. The mother's strong work-man-like hands form a contrast with the girl's elegant limbs. Mathilda has long hair and elegant long legs but these features are not prominent in this painting.

Figure 66. Mary Pridmore, *Mathilda II*, 2005-6

In the second painting, *Mathilda II* or *Stretched Out,* a larger canvas is needed to allow the fully extended figure to remain life-size. (Figure 66) In effect, the space around the figure is enlarged, and it takes on a stronger presence. This determined the return to a larger canvas, and in turn, the larger canvas allows for freer brushwork and an even greater loosening up of the treatment in the painting of patterns. The patterns are now sourced from random decorative elements, not specific images.

The pattern of the bedspread is as in life, however, the carpet pattern and the wall-paper pattern are made up of random elements. The wall-paper has a blurred motif which suggests a flower form, but the pattern is unclear and distorted, as if recollected through memory; its ground colour is a soft green with flicks of cerulean blue and magenta. The diagonal elements are an important part of its composition and create informal lines of sight. There is a three quarter angle of view. The whole composition is satisfyingly asymmetric. The dominant element in the picture is the piercing light coming through the window which almost transfigures the mother. Transfiguration is a religious term meaning glorify, elevate, idealize. The word transfiguration is arcane in our vocabulary, but this sense is an unintentional outcome of the painting. This is blinding autumn light from the far southern hemisphere and it contrasts with the soft North European light in Vermeer and Hammershoi.

Matilda III, is also a large painting, the size is determined by the elegant figure of the girl who sits on the side of the bed while her mother does her hair. (Figure 67) Again, we see the side of the bed, which creates depth, although this effect is undercut by the mass of the bedspread which floats upwards toward the viewer. A central compositional element in *Mathilda III* is the child's waist length hair. Reflecting now, I see the picture has many antecedents, the most famous being the iconic image of female beauty, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus,* 1485 and Alexander Cabanel's *Birth of Venus,* 1863. It is in a sense a cliché, but long hair remains a symbol of sexuality.

> Hair, so the textbooks say, is a secondary sexual characteristic. In the nude it is a prime signifier of sex: plenty of it in the right places is delightful and feminine; pubic hair, need it be said, may hide the lack of the phallus but is somehow too close to *being* that lack, which is why it cannot be shown; and hair is disallowed for some reason in all manner of places, armpit (usually), nipple, stomach, legs – the list is still current. The right kind of hair more than makes up for the wrong kind, however, in pictures like

> Cabanel's *Venus*: the painter is encouraged to provide a miserable profusion of tresses, overtaking the body and weighing it down, acting in this case as a second (equally spermatorrhoeaic) foam. This kind of hirsuteness is a strong sign and a safe one, for hair let down is decent and excessive at the same time; it is allowed disorder, simple luxuriousness, slight wantonness; and none of these qualities need be alarming, since hair on the head can be combed out and pinned up in due course.[11]

Unlike the Venus images referred to, the young girl in *Mathilda III* is hidden by her hair, and is in the safety of her home with her mother's presiding presence. (Figure 67) The girl's pose is awkward as she twists her body toward her mother who is placing a clip in her hair. The girl and the mother merge into one; it is the kind of relaxed intimacy between mother and daughter which will break at adolescence. The colour is more garish, the green of the Ella series reappears but there is a shift to the acqua, a colour I associate with my mother who had clothes in this colour. The patterned elements are again loosely and intuitively treated, and built up over a number of layers to achieve a richly vibrant effect. The wallpaper pattern is from a small abstracted leaf motif, and leaf figures float across an ultramarine blue ground. This is intended as a link to the blue of the Virgin's cape in the Bellini paintings. The dress is thickly painted and the intention was to dissolve the dress into the bedspread, to link her to the safety of the mother's world represented not just by the figure of the mother, but by the metonymic representation of the mother in the domestic interior.

[11] Michael Kieran and Dominic Mciver Lopes, *Knowing Art, Essays in Aesthetics and Epistemology,* London, Springer Netherlands, 2007, pp 19-34

Figure 67. Mary Pridmore, *Mathilda III*, 2006

In the Mathilda paintings there has been a shift in scale which has assisted the relaxation into the project. This work is less an illustration of an idea and more an expression of my own ‘dreaming’, to borrow a phrase from aboriginal culture. Within these constraints, the overall project has developed more personal expression; the application of colour and the loose painting of patterns are outcomes of this second series.

Mary Cassatt’s paintings have been a strong influence, not just by way of giving permission to approach new subject matter, but her painting

technique, particularly her treatment of clothing and wallpaper. Van Buren discusses Cassatt's use of soft bright colours and ephemeral brush strokes and reads them as signifiers of the sense of process, growth and emotional development (the real subject of the series of paintings of mothers and babies at the attachment stage). Of the mother's dress in *Baby's First Caress,* (Figure 17) and the wallpaper in, *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child* (Figure 16) she says, "they shimmer and blur in such a way as to present movement, lack of rigidity and a complex view of the object".[12] Cassatt's treatment of wall-paper and pattern has been an influence on my own way of painting these same elements. Van Buren's descriptions of Cassatt's work influenced my treatment of these elements "The background wall paper pulses with vibrant forms, ephemeral white dresses of mother and child mottled with blue, yellow and pink represent the rhythm of life through reflected and modifying colors." [13]

Final Stage – Completion of the project, March 2006 – July 2007; Phoebe Series; Tess Series

I begin this section with a journal entry from early 2006, before the Phoebe series was commenced.

> Physical pleasure, active rather than passive states are central. Drawing on the early-middle phase there will be states of focussed attention like the girl undoing the necklace clasp, like Vermeer's *Lacemaker*. An equal and opposite trope will be the body in movement, the dancing girl. I've already painted a sketch of this. I hope there will be a more expansive mood in the new work.

[12] van Buren, op. cit., p134
[13] ibid, pp134

Phoebe Series

The Phoebe series was inspired by a meeting with Phoebe and her mother, by chance, at a local café. Phoebe was eating a croissant and was licking raspberry jam from a small pot with her finger. Her sensual pleasure, touch and taste, captured my attention. She was oblivious to what was happening around her. My intention was to replicate something of that moment when I took photographs of Phoebe and her mother at their home. In this series I wanted to push the figure ground relationship so that the figures would dissolve into the ground. The intention was to create more ambivalent spaces. The images were to hover between real space and imagined space. I liked the idea of Phoebe licking her finger but although I tried to replicate the original situation, Phoebe had other ideas. The images which were strongest were the overhead shots of Phoebe painting her mother's toes in their lounge room. Before the final paintings were executed, I went back to re-shoot the series. It was late afternoon, and again, there was strong light into the room.

The following are my initial thoughts about the Phoebe series.

> The proposed works concern a young girl of kindergarten age playing with her mother. The daughter is using her mother as a model or dummy, a doll perhaps. Although the mother is a prop there is sense of tenderness expressed in this young girls' play. She is dolling her mother up somewhat clumsily – the nail varnish is applied liberally, not just on the nails, but on the toes as well. I guess the mother is a stand-in for herself. The mother told me how, even when her daughter was only two years old, she'd enjoyed having a daughter as opposed to a dearly loved son because their way of being together, their play was different. There was something for her in the mother-daughter dyad at the earliest age which was satisfying in very different ways to her experience of the mother-son dyad. Phoebe is absolutely engaged in the task she has chosen, for the moment her mother is her canvas – she is the artist. Some may regard this activity as sentimental however I believe the child is engaged in a sophisticated task

> which is important to her development – physically, emotionally and psychologically. The mother and daughter are at work/play.

Play is the work of children at Phoebe's age. Phoebe's play has multiple levels. Physically she is developing her fine motor skills. She is also creating her earliest art experiments, exploring colour dissolved in varnish; she is the young artist all children are believed to be. Her artwork is body art, both ephemeral and performative. Psychologically she explores both the complex tasks of creating sexual identity and developing individuation (the psychological separation of the child from the mother). Phoebe's absorption in her task reminds me of what it is like painting when you're having a good day. There is a union of mind and body in the process and you become absent to the wider world. This absorption in activity is a form of meditation. All of these tasks are stimulated and supported by the empathic presence of her mother.

I attempted to preserve a moment. I had recorded Phoebe doing other things, eating a croissant, putting glitter on her mother's cheeks, but the images of her as a painter added another dimension to my project. The camera angles offer slightly different views of the child as she paints one toe nail on one foot, and then moves across to other foot. She is wearing a summer dress which spreads out around her and leaves her smooth shoulders and soft white flesh uncovered. The mother sits patiently, free to be in her private thoughts because her daughter is absorbed in her activity. The composition places the mother in a central position. She wears casual clothes, culottes and a teeshirt. The angle of view focuses attention on the mother's pelvis, a reference to the mother's own sexuality, a theme obscured in the Mathilda series. In this series the space around the figures commands our attention. The painting of the rug has been painted freely mixing colours wet on wet to create a fluid lyrical sensation.

The concentration on one composition reduces the representational element of the work and increases its poetic dimension through repetition of formal elements. The treatment of the patterned carpet in these paintings becomes a variation on a theme. I decided to use ultramarine blue as my starting point. I was thinking of Bellini's use of blue particularly in *The Doge Leonardo Loredan (1503)* which I saw in London at the National Gallery in 2005. (Figure 69) As I wanted to allow the figures to be submerged into the space it would have been better to use the colours of the actual rug which were a mauve/red, with beiges, pinks, brown. The idea was to set up a parallel between the absorption of the figure into the ground with the pleasurable absorption of the mind on a task. This series was the hardest to resolve, I believe and this was because of the strong blues, which have worked against my initial idea. Each painting has been worked up to stand independently, and yet, to be part of a whole.

Figure 68. Giovanni Bellini, *The Doge Leonardo Loredan*, 1503

The Phoebe series is about movement albeit only small fragments. There is a balletic quality in the small shifts from painting to painting of the figure across the surface of each painting. The movement of the mother's head, up, down, to one side and the other, the repositioning of her legs, the stretching out and retracting of her arms and hands, letting the varnish dry, holding up her toes, letting them relax again, always facilitating Phoebe's task, being her canvas. Phoebe's crouch position

alters and with it her dress which spreads around her. Phoebe's arm moves across her mother's body, pulls back and then goes to full stretch. The full stretch uses her whole body. This is not colouring in at a desk on a confined sheet. These are the movements of a young painter, already at ease in a haptic way of working her materials across her mother's body-canvas. Phoebe's hair falls loosely around her head concealing her face; she is positioned so that we focus on her movements rather than her face. As the figure shifts so do the colours and patterns and the mother-daughter dyad forms a single figural relationship against the carpet ground. (Figures 69 - 72)

Figure 69. Mary Pridmore *Phoebe I* 2006-7.

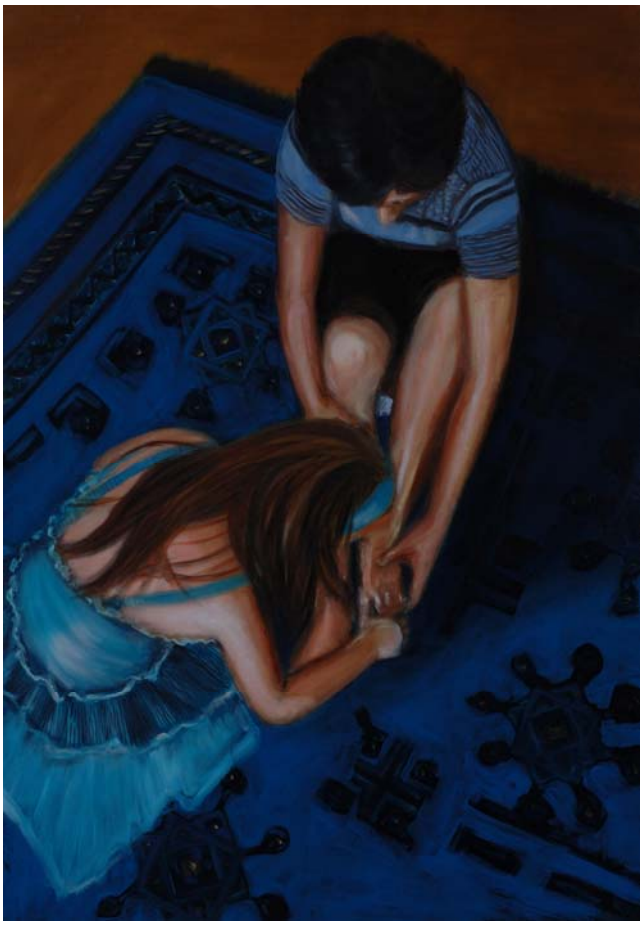

Figure 70. Mary Pridmore, *Phoebe II*, 2006-7

Figure 71.Mary Pridmore, *Phoebe III*, 2006-7

Figure 72. Mary Pridmore, *Phoebe IV*, 2006-7

Tess series

The last two series contain sub-narratives within the overall narrative of the thesis. The Tess series emerged over time. Tess and her mother have been my close friends for some years. One day while her mother and I were having a coffee in their familyroom/kitchen, Tess was pirouetting nearby. She wore a dress with a patchwork of patterns in black, white, pinks, oranges and greens, on a black/grey ground. It was a loose shapeless dress and as she twirled the dress swirled out away from her body, and the fabric in motion created soft blurred patterns. I took a couple of photos with no specific intention to use the images. The Tess series, set in the early twenty-first century, is about freedom and bodily pleasure in physical movement. This simultaneously animates the static patterns which have been represented in the earlier paintings; the blurred and swirling patterns have a lyrical quality but

also their distorted patterns refer back to my earlier ambivalence about the balldress for the women of the 1950s – perhaps their joy but within the context of stultified lives.

Dance is movement in rhythm to music. T.S. Eliot refers to dance a few times in the *Four Quartets.* These are abstruse references however the phrase 'there's only dance' has been an evocative refrain for me for many years. I include the quotation in its broader context.

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity.
> Except for the point, the still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only dance.
> (*Burnt Norton* II. 16-21)

Perhaps Eliot is referring to a stillness like a meditation. In recent times I had learned of the whirling dervishes. Hossein Valamanesh had visited the School of Art in Hobart in 2001 and he showed images he had made of dervishes. I was aware from this time that twirling had associations with spirituality and meditation. (Figure 73) The idea of dance is associated with ecstasy and pleasure.

Figure 73. Hossein Valamanesh, *The Lover Circles His Own Heart,* 1996

The photos were in my studio for a couple of years, before I decided to use Tess as a model. By this time Tess's family had moved to

Melbourne. I travelled to Melbourne in January, 2006 to take the photos which formed the final series. It was a further ten months before I resolved which images to use and began painting the final series. I had decided to focus on Tess alone twirling in a pure colour field; to signify the young girls' passage from the security of domestic space into the unknown, the transitional world of adolescence, through to adulthood. The colour 'jaune brilliant' is scumbled on to the canvas to create a space which is open and undefined. The girls' dress with its blurred distorted patchwork of patterning sinks into the warm void. The painting of the pattern represents the joy inherent in motion. It is an ambiguous image, on some viewings, a dizzying almost nauseating image. My intention was to convey a moment of pure joy. There are, of course, hints of other dimensions in the distortion of the floral pattern which becomes grotesque in places. Another quote from *Burnt Norton* connects movement with desire.

> The detail of the pattern is movement
> As in the figure of the ten stairs
> Desire itself is movement
> (*Burnt Norton*, V23 – 25)

These words speak of mystical experience; for me they contain only flickers of meaning, like the pattern which appears and disappears on the twirling dress. The cropping of the image is to create a feeling as though the figure is coming out of the frame. Tess's first steps are tentative; it's as though she's emerging onto a stage, she comes from the back left corner. She twirls closer and the back of her dress comes out towards us. Then she moves back to centre stage, by now she is smiling and we see her face suffused with pleasure. She is still within her own consciousness not engaging with us. She finds her rhythm and relaxes into the pure enjoyment of being in her body. The seductive surface of the moving pattern is painted with great pleasure; I too am less self-conscious. The Tess series is resolved and painted relatively

quickly. There are six in this series and they are in two different groups. (Figures 74-79)

Figure 74. Mary Pridmore, *Tess I*, 2007 Figure 75. Mary Pridmore, *Tess II*, 2007
Figure 76. Mary Pridmore, *Tess III*, 2007

Figure 77. Mary Pridmore, *Tess IV*, 2007 Figure 78. Mary Pridmore, *Tess V*, 2007
Figure 79. Mary Pridmore, *Tess VI*, 2007

Summary

Throughout the painting of the body of work there were self-imposed pressures to create ways of painting which were in keeping with the goals of the project; to convey a sense of an embodied subject rather than a perfect object. In painting the human figure, I aspired to create a likeness but to avoid the smooth surfaces associated with classical painting of the human figure exemplified in the work of Ingres. I wanted the work to reveal some of my working process, for the viewer first to see a painting, then the figures. The traces of my body were to be visible on the surface of the painting.

To echo the theme of the daughter's absorption, I sought to animate the ground so as to bring it forward allowing the figure to be absorbed, in the manner of Vuillard's paintings. This was a strategy I strugggled with throughout the four series. My decision to use vibrant colour, turning away from the pastels and pinks (also flesh colours) associated with a feminine aesthetic, undermined this intention. This was however partly resolved by my animating the space in which each figure was positioned with loosely painted pattern or deeply saturated colour. This way I brought the figure and the ground into equal importance in relation to each other.

The stylistic shifts between the four groups evolved in response to the particularity of each dyad. There is a loosening of my treatment of paint over the course of the body of work. The exhibition works were painted over a two and a half year period. Individual paintings, within each series, were resolved both individually and within each group. The strength of the body of work is an accumulation of the stylistic facility developed in response to each group of painting (that is the different

dyads and their settings). Different painterly influences are evident in each group and reflect a variety of influences some consciously sought and others unconsciously brought to bear, particularly after my period in Paris. I expected to find the resolution (conceptual and painterly) of each work would become simpler but I found that each painting and each series provided different challenges, these had to be worked through slowly in the studio. The stylistic shifts, (degrees of realism and a gradual loosening or tightening up within the paintings from group to group) are related to the shifts within the broad themes within each series. Each image captures a moment. In the Ella and Tess series these moments are spaced out, over part of an afternoon. In the works created in the last part of the project - the Phoebe and the Tess series - there is a condensing of time. These last two series occur over minutes. Overall there is a gradual loosening up of my painting. As the concepts become freer so does the painting. The conceptual tension in the Ella series is the most self-conscious and the painting is the tightest; there is also a more realistic intent. After this series the project developed its own momentum made possible because my confidence about the project increased. There is a paradox because as I went along I developed more command of my subject and along with this came a relaxation into the project. In the last two series I wanted to create works with stronger formal elements across the series. In the last two series the size of each canvas is consistent throughout the series while in the early works the dimensions of each canvas is different. While there are shifts within each group, there is an overall coherence in the treatment of the figure, the decorative patterning and strong use of colour.

As I struggled with the specific technical and formal demands, there was always the reoccurring question related to the relevance of paint and the conceptual intent of the project. It was reassuring to discover the recently published work *Painting People the state of the art* (2006) in which Charlotte Mullins argues that painting and figure painting in particular is far from dead (as Douglas Crimp had asserted in his 1981

essay “The End of Painting”). Sabine Folie, one of the curators in the 2002 figurative exhibition ‘Cher Peintre, Lieber Maler, Dear Painter’ at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, wrote: “Painting may have been for a short time somehow denied by an overexposure of video computer-art or photography but in the end, its methods of representation and transformation were enriched by all those media and not diminished.” [14] Mullins makes a number of important points about this most recent burst of figure painting. It sits between fact and fiction, allowing the work to be layered. In my work there is a layering of past and present experience to create a new reality. She argues that because painting is process based and fluid it allows for working sections to rise and fall. Mullins quotes from the painter Cecily Brown who describes the alchemical nature of painting where “the paint is transformed into image, and hopefully paint and the image transform together into a third and new thing.” [15] There is a view now that painting is invested with power beyond the descriptive, that cave paintings and their contemporary equivalents are signifiers of belief systems. The notion of hierarchy is gone and portraiture as a genre is gone, the figure painting which is current is not portraiture but figure painting which has a conceptual basis. The artists in Mullins book use the figure to investigate wider ideas.

[14] Charlotte Mullins *Painting People the state of the art* London, Thames and Hudson(2006), p9
[15] ibid, p7

Chapter 4 Conclusion

The rigorous processes of the doctorate have expanded my painting practice and my research interests in important new ways. The project began with a number of ideas already partially explored by my work in Honours. They can best be summed up by the words – the portrait, the sensual, the female body, the self, the mother, the feminine. In the early stages this list began to expand, embracing broader concepts and possibilities such as the intimate, the relational, the domestic, the figurative, the decorative, the child, the daughter, the maternal. Most important has been the shift from the specific genre of (self)-portraiture to the broader category of figuration. My Honours work was a body of self-portraits and while there was an element of using my body as a tool for learning, that work was also about identity. The doctoral project has been an investigation of concepts other than identity and so figuration has replaced the portrait as the central tool of the project.

I sought to create a body of work addressing issues concerned with the feminism/feminine dichotomy in contemporary culture using the medium of painting, and to contribute something new within the field of feminist art practice. This influenced my decision to make a body of work about the (missing) mother-daughter dyad; which then involved a shift to the relational. As it happens, this coincides with a shift occurring in art at an international level, recently discussed by Catherine Zegher in her essay "The inside is the outside: the relational as the (feminine) space". She says: "Whereas modernism's radical and inventive strategies were to be more and more dependent on alienation, separation, negativity, violence, and de(con)struction, the twenty-first century may well be developing a changed criticality increasingly defined by inclusion, connectivity, conversation, construction, and even healing attitudes. The aesthetics of relation and reciprocity surely results crucially, and in the greater part, from the work of women artists but also from that of some male artists often denied recognition precisely because of their "feminine" approach

to the world." [1] An important element was the development of a dialogic method of working with my models; they thus contributed to the creation of the thesis.

My painting practice has been energised through theoretical discourse, drawing on a range of disciplines - philosophy, art history and contemporary curatorial practice. While reading has been the main avenue into theory, the engagement with critical discussion within the academy and with other artists has greatly facilitated the progression of concepts within my painting practice. Time and again I have found that seeing is a highly conditioned cultural process which must not be overlooked. There is of course the paradox; the more you know, the more you see, and vice versa. The concept of praxis - the movement from studio practice to theoretical reading and back again, while always maintaining some form of studio presence is now a permanent feature of my practice as an artist, as is the process of conceptualising my research interests as questions for studio investigation.

My understanding of what constitutes feminist art practice is now clearer. My initial ideas about feminism and feminist art practice were derived from radical second-wave feminism. Nonetheless, I was concerned that if I made work beyond these precepts, I would compromise my commitment to feminism. However, the scope of feminist enquiry and art practice since the early 1990s has shifted radically and as a result my contribution sits more comfortably within the contemporary field than I initially thought. My position remains that women artists, especially artists and mothers, are still marginalised and women's subjectivities need to find ways of being represented in their full diversity and in ways which assist in creating better hegemonic structures for their daily lives.

[1] Catherine Zegher in "The inside is the outside: the relational as the (feminine) space", Carol Armstrong and Catherine Zegher (ed), *Women Artists at the Millennium*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, October Books ,The MIT Press, 2006, p216.

There were periods of self-doubt but the work was pursued in the belief that I was working from a feminine and feminist position. This doubt concerned a number of issues. Firstly, how the work would be located within feminist debates concerning the mother, the female body and sensuality and what form of painting would best resolve/accommodate these issues. There was also the issue of 'kinds of realism' and its relationship to abstract elements within the painting. A further issue concerned the form of practice. While the project is primarily concerned with painting I sought to explore curating as a way of engaging with contemporary audiences and exploring issues. Researching the work of Nancy Spero (1926-) I found some words which sustained me throughout the project: "What I'm trying to say then in a kind of lyrical and positive way, is that these women…are empowered and that they are sexual…These women are protagonists and they are subjects. I am doing this in my language and it is not primarily for the male gaze."[2] What this means essentially is that I have agency; I am creating the images and exploring concepts from the perspective of a twenty-first century female.

I now realise my earlier grounding in the dominant masculinist discourses of my first undergraduate degree in the 1970s, a position akin to the masculinist position of High Modernism, as well as from the discourses of early second-wave feminism created the tension which drove the project forward. From the period of High Modernism there were debates about abstraction and figuration, about the domestic as a subject and about painting itself. From feminism there were debates about painting, the use of the female body as a subject and the role of the mother in society.

The thesis works are the outcome of resolving these strongly held personal positions concerning feminism and feminity. Drawing inspiration from the painters Giovanni Bellini, Mary Cassatt, Edouard Vuillard, Gerhardt Richter and Emily Kame Kngwarreye and the

[2] Nancy Spero in an interview with Nicole Jolicoeur and Neil Tenhaaf 'Defying the Death Machine' *Parachute*, no. 39 June, July, August, 1985, p53 *Nancy Spero* Catalogue, Fruitmarket Gallery, 1987 p14

theorists Julia Kristeva, Luce Iragaray, Griselda Pollock and Linda Nochlin, I created a visual language to express my concerns. This was to do with combining the figure with loosely painted and fluid areas of decoration and vibrant colour. It also involved the figures turning away from the viewer and thereby creating an empathetic rather than a voyeuristic position for the viewer, allowing the viewer to enter the intimate space but focus on the quiet moments of interiority and the 'reciprocity dance' between the mother and the daughter. There was also the narrative sequence which signalled that the intense process of early mothering was finite and the independent gaze of the mother which was to suggest her psychological independence.

The paintings have greater currency than I had anticipated. As discussed in chapter two, figure painting, in particular the use of the figure to investigate concepts, is going through a major revival since the start of the millennium. Rather than being killed off by digital photography and the computer, these optical aids have re-invigorated painting.

Recently I came across the work of the Australian painter Angela Brennan when curator Dr Kyla McFarlane presented a paper about her work in Hobart.[3] Brennan's concerns overlap with mine and her work has inspired new possibilities. While I have explored the feminine *jouissance*/feminism dichotomy using representation and figurative painting, Brennan's work explores the same broad concepts using abstraction, and to a much lesser degree figuration. In the catalogue Max Delany describes her paintings as "exemplary of a loosening up of the perceived strictures of late-modernist formalism. She was celebrated for introducing social reference and quotidian experience into the supposedly autonomous realm of abstract art. …Brennan's work was also understood as representative of a feminine *jouissance*, a libidinous play, exceeding the laws of the modernist canon and its heroic language

[3] Contemporary Art Services Tasmania, Curatorial Workshop, April 14, Hobart, 2006

and order."[4] I am now in a position to explore a more abstract painterly language either with or without the human figure.

Currently I have two curatorial projects accepted for public galleries in Tasmania in 2008. Both of these projects are concerned with the domestic in contemporary art practice. *Dream Home* will be a national and international exhibition at the Plimsoll Gallery in April 2008; it was inspired by meeting in Paris with a prominent Israeli artist, Dvora Morag, who uses the domestic as her primary place of investigation. The exhibition will bring together established and emerging artists and investigate ways in which they explore the domestic in their current art practice in a range of media – painting, photography, video, sculpture and installation. Its main concept is articulated by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space, The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Space* and concerns the way the domestic worlds we have known insert their presence in our inner lives through dream and memory. [5] *From Home* deals with the child represented in works in different media by five local artists using both abstract and figurative modes of expression. Conceptually *From Home* is about an honest engagement by the artists with the inextricable nuances *home* places on the process of making and in the artworks themselves. All of the artists proposed for the exhibition are parents, both male and female, actively engaged with the primary care of their children who are at school or still in pre-school. *From Home* will be shown at the Burnie Regional Gallery in November, 2008.

Whilst I believe the project has come to a positive conclusion, further possibilities now arise. The thematics of absorption and the idea of the dance and the dancer (pleasure in motion) are the immediate painterly

[4] Max Delany and Dr Kyla McFarlane (curators) *Angela Brennan Every Morning I wake up on the Wrong Side of Capitalism,* A Survey Exhibition, Monash University of Art 21 June – 26 August 2006, p3

[5] "If we have retained an element of dream in our memories, if we have gone beyond merely assembling exact recollections, bit by bit the house that was lost in the mists of time will appear from out the shadow. We do nothing to recognise it; with intimacy it recovers its entity, in the mellowness and imprecision of the inner life. It is as though something fluid has collected our memories and we ourselves were dissolved in this fluid of the past." Gaston Bachelard, op..cit., p56

concerns which have evolved. Through painting, and now potentially through curatorial practice, there remain a multitude of resolutions to the questions that this project has opened up.

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1. *Ella I,* Oil on canvas, 83.5 x111 cm, 2005
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3. *Ella III,* Oil on canvas, 101 x 101 cm, 2005
4. *Mathilda I,* Oil on canvas, 91 x 97 cm, 2005/6
5. *Mathilda II,* Oil on canvas, 137 x 154 cm, 2005/6
6. *Mathilda III*, Oil on canvas, 102 x 175cm, 2006
7. *Phoebe I,* Oil on canvas, 96 x 137 cm, 2006/7
8. *Phoebe II*, Oil on canvas, 96 x 137 cm, 2006/7
9. *Phoebe III,* Oil on canvas, 96 x 137 cm, 2006/7
10. *Phoebe IV,* Oil on canvas, 96 x 137 cm, 2006/7
11. *Tess I,* Oil on linen, 61 x 183 cm, 2007
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14. *Tess IV,* Oil on linen, 61 x 183 cm, 2007
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Appendix Four: Curriculum Vitae

Education

BFA Honours (First Class), School of Art, Hobart, University of Tasmania, 2002

BFA, School of Art, Hobart, University of Tasmania, 1999-2001

Prior Education

Dip ED. University of Tasmania, 1976

BA (Hons), English, University of Tasmania, 1975

BA, University of Tasmania, 1972-75

Prior Employment

HSC English Teacher

1777-80 Hellyer College, Burnie

1982-84 Elizabeth College, Hobart

1984 Rose Bay Convent, Sydney

1985 – 1990 Hobart College, Mt. Nelson

Exhibitions

Solo

Flow, Colville Street Art Gallery, 54 Colville St., Battery Point, Hobart, August 16 – September 5, 2007

Rapport, Entrepot Gallery, Hunter St, Hobart, March 15 – 31, 2006

Re Dress, Entrepot Gallery, Hunter St, Hobart, May 9-18, 2001

Group

Anniversary Exhibition Colville Street Gallery Artists, battery Point, Hobart, December 5, 2007– January 28, 2008

*Cast Members Show***,** *Cast Gallery***,** N Hobart, December 1 - 24, 2007

Anniversary Exhibition Colville Street Gallery Artists, Battery Point, Hobart**,** December 7, 2006 – January 26, 2007

CAST Members Show, N Hobart, December 2006

CAST Members Show, Cast Gallery, N Hobart, December 2005

Propinquity and Distance – Self-portraiture in Contemporary Painting Practice, Carnegie Gallery, Hobart, November 18 – December 12, 2004

Postcard Show, Linden Gallery, St Kilda, January 2003

Portia Geach Memorial Award Exhibition, S H Ervin Gallery, The Rocks, Sydney, September 25 – Nov 2, 2003

Tangent, Honours Graduate Show, Plimsoll Gallery, School of Art, Hunter St., Hobart, November, 2002

CAST Members Show, Cast Gallery, 27 Tasma St., N Hobart, December 2001

10.08.0', TUU Painting Society, Sidespace Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, August 8-15, 2001

Red, 3rd Year Painting Students, Fine Arts Gallery, Sandy Bay, Hobart, May 2001

Installation, State Library of Tasmania, Cnr Bathurst & Murray Sts. Hobart, October 18 –31**,** 2001

Raw, Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, Salamanca Place, Hobart, March 6 – 17, 2001

Untitled, Digital Imaging Inaugural Exhibition, Fine Arts Gallery, Sandy Bay, Hobart, October 18 – 31, 2000

Publications

Catalogue essay

Mary Pridmore, 2004, *Propinquity and Distance, Self-portraiture in Contemporary Painting Practice*, Carnegie Gallery, Hobart, Monotone Art Printers, Hobart, ISBN 1 86295 213 2

Curated Projects

Mary Pridmore, 2004, *Propinquity and Distance, Self-portraiture in Contemporary Painting Practice*, Carnegie Gallery, Hobart

Grants

2004 Carnegie Gallery, Hobart, $2000

2004 NAVA Visual and Craft Artists' Grant, $450
2006 Exhibition Development Grant, CAST, $2890
Project: 'Dream Home' a mixed media exhibition of national and international artists examining the domestic in contemporary art practice.

Awards

PhD Research Scholarship, University of Tasmania, September 2004 – July 2007
Finalist, Portia Geach Memorial Award, SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney, Sept 25 – Nov 4, **2003**
Rosamond Studio Residency, Cité Internationale Des Arts, Paris, May 3 – June 29, **2005**

Appendix Five: Catalogue Essay

Propinquity and Distance -

Self–Portraiture in Contemporary Painting Practice,

Carnegie Gallery, November 18 – December 12, 2004

The idea for this exhibition grew from my first glimpse of Wayne Brookes' luxurious painting of red velvet chairs in *The Gates of Paradise 1V*. This painting is the last in a series inspired by Brookes' visit to the Napoleonic rooms in the Louvre in Paris. I saw it first from a peculiar perspective as I looked down from over my studio wall. Its virtuoso character was stronger for me because it was seen in a rough artist's studio. This space served to contain the work and make the experience paradoxically more exotic and intimate. The full gold and red were muted in the studio light. Thinking about the painting later I sensed a psyche bursting through and a kind of rapture in physical space settled into my head. Distant rooms are brought to life; it's as though Brookes has floated up and touched the ceiling and taken us with him.

Conversations with Brookes confirmed this. Through several years of painting practice, which included the traditional genres of both portraiture and self-portraiture, he began seeing himself reflected within the rooms from which came the inspiration for the *The Gates of Paradise* series. His central argument is that the rooms he paints are allegories of self. The exhibition is born of this concept. Self-portraiture is a wider genre than most of us think. In his words, 'the very substance of paint becomes a pool of reflection, allowing the painter to drag out submerged issues about themselves and record them within the material.'[1]

Within Brookes' work the concepts of propinquity and distance reverberate. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines propinquity as

[1] Brookes, W., (2003), *Visual Virtuosity – Contemporary Quatratura Painting, An Allegory of the Portrait*, MFA exegesis, University of Tasmania, p4

nearness, closeness or proximity which may relate to either space, blood, nature, relationship, belief or time. All of the work has been produced by artists working in geographic proximity to each other and completed within the last four years. More importantly, the works arise from personal experience and psychological introspection and the artists use the traditional medium associated with portraiture - that is, paint on a two dimensional surface - to re-examine concepts of self-portraiture within and across the painted surface. Each artist finds the process of painting to be intimately connected to his/her investigation.

These experiences of the artists' propinquity, or closeness, to the subject matter are refined over time and, through the practice of painting, they become abstractions. Each artist subjects the primary experience to close scrutiny 'as if afar they look'. Within this process lies the double vision Elizabeth Barrett Browning refers to in *Aurora Leigh* (1853-4).

> *But poets should*
> *Exert a double vision; should have eyes*
> *To see near things as comprehensively*
> *As if afar they took their point of sight*
> *And distant things as intimately deep*
> *As if they touched them.*
> *Let us strive for this.*

The question arises: was this connection between each artist's modus operandi - using paint in the extraction and presentation of personal and psychological subject matter on a two dimensional surface - the result of propinquity? Had our proximity to each other influenced our decision to persist with paint, against the grain of the new orthodoxies within the art world which give prominence to artists using any medium but paint? Or was this a reflection of the Zeitgeist? Or a mixture of both? Painting and its relationship to subjectivity were coming together and reinvigorating each other. Some of us saw our

work as self-portraiture but others didn't use that particular label, probably because traditional notions of the self-portrait have been limited to images of the artist's face and, in particular, the eyes as a window to the soul.

Alan Young's paintings have always been based on the world in which he lives. Raised in Hobart's northern suburbs, from where as an undergraduate he made the daily trek into Art School on the Metro bus, his vibrant paintings are filled with the transient but repeated experiences of his everyday life – lunch in the Caf, conversations on the bus and at the family dinner table, hanging out with friends, 'going out to raves'. These experiences are transformed into colourful, layered surfaces which explore the tensions of contemporary life as a young artist. Young says 'My paintings are full of energy, humour and honesty. My work charts my navigation through space.' Text is embedded into the surface and messages emerge and recede. The marks of the body are clear; there is no attempt at hiding the shaky marks from his oil-stick. Young has physical limitations to deal with, which he has made fundamental to his painting process. His use of colour is complex but childlike. A life is explored through symbol, line and colour and from the difficulty of navigating identity in post-modern society comes life and energy.

Lucienne Rickard's work records her body in a very specific way. The works are based upon a memory not so much of a distinct moment but of many moments recalled as one - of her mother brushing her hair as a daily ritual when she was young. Rickard chose to re-enact the memory as a painterly ritual in order to both record and reconnect with the experience. She says of the work: 'A form of memory was not only left on the canvas, but was evoked by performing the brushing. It held a sense of memory that was not consciously retained or reached for, but was, like the brushstrokes themselves, compulsive. It is this weight of the amassed gestures that conveys common memory, an entrenched knowledge of being a portion within some perpetuity.' The works also

indicate her stature; she begins by making the marks on the canvas as high as she can reach. The marks, creamy white or ink blue, become the dominant mode of communication. In one work the canvas is scratched through and we are confronted with the wall beneath. Here, painting is stripped back to a primitive ritual.

Destanne Norris Brown's paintings are traditional gestural works performed on shaped boards which map her body as posture. She also uses the traditional rectangular canvas. These works articulate for the viewer various emotions which are transmuted into a range of marks, at times violent. Here we see the tangible evidence of painting as a performative practice. Wild and brightly coloured paint squeezed straight from the tube but combined in complementary swirls creates a vortex in *Pool of Deception* . Is this an image of pleasure or fear? Contrasted with these images are paintings made up of thin glazes. The theme of water is clear but its mood is shifting. These works are inspired by personal experience. Mythology has reinforced her direction. 'In most mythologies female deities journey on the rivers searching for someone they have lost or a part of themselves they hope to retrieve. This is the quest not for self but for a missing part'.[2]

Mary Pridmore takes the everyday, easily overlooked, moments within her home life; a portrait of her world which articulates her view of intimacy. To refute popular notions of parenting which place emphasis on an intense emotional relationship from parent to child, parenting is here revealed as a juxtaposition of lives, an immersion in certain kinds of propinquity. Each portrait deals with two figures, child and adult, in relation to each other, rather than a single figure. She wants to distance her work from the portrait as lapdog of the man (rarely the woman) of genius. The figures are contained within the same physical space but they occupy the room ambivalently; psychically they are free but physically they are close. Loose brush work and flat interacting colour

[2] Croutier, A.L., (1992) *Taking the Waters: Spirit, Art, Sensuality*, New York, Abbeville Publishing Group, p51

fields within a three dimensional space pit the viewer's experience of a two dimensional picture plane against the illusion of three dimensional space. Colour is vibrant. Various shades of red, the Chinese colour for prosperity and happiness, re-occur across the paintings - the carpet, the flowers on the girl's dress, the woman's shirt, the objects in the cabinet, the family dinner table.

Painting is well suited to self-portraiture because the body leaves its intimate marks on the canvas or board. It's not just that the hand makes marks directly but that a performance is recorded on the two-dimensional surface. The artist begins with an idea, elements are mixed and something new emerges.

The final element of propinquity occurs when the viewer experiences a sense of intimacy with the artist through his/her work in the gallery encounter. And what of distance, that oppositional word in the title? It's chiefly there, in the refinement of concepts and distillation of experience into paint. Implicit in all these paintings is the knowledge that huge gulfs of distance can remain at the closest of moments. So you have it. Diverse experience and personal history mix with pigment and its emulsifying agents to inform an on-going conversation about contemporary painting and versions of the self.

Mary Pridmore 2004